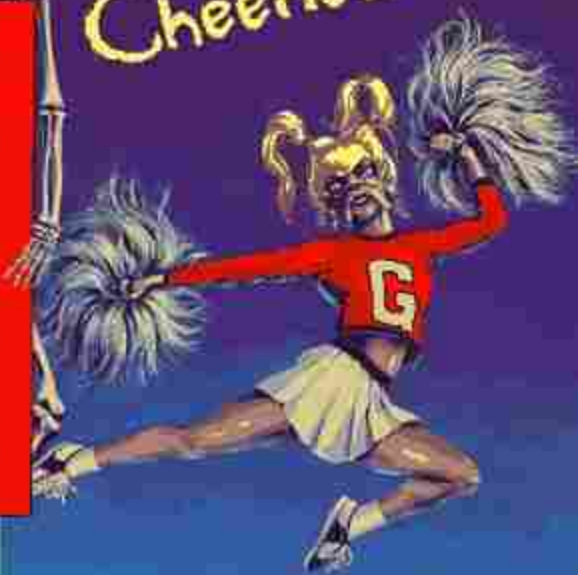


The Curse of the Cheerleaders

SPINNING
GLERS



M. T. COFFIN

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My heart was pounding and my hand was shaking.
I ran my finger down the list that was posted on the door of the principal's office and found what I'd been hoping for.

"I made it!" I screamed.
Several kids in the hallway turned to look at me. I felt myself turning red from embarrassment, but I didn't care. I was now a member of Grafton Elementary School's cheerleading squad!

"Diane! Did you really make it?"
I turned.

Sue Peters was standing there.

"Yes!" I said in a loud whisper.

Sue started jumping up and down. "I'm so excited for you!"

Just then, the first bell rang.

"Come on," Sue said. "We'll be late for class!"

We hurried through the hallway toward our classroom.

I looked over at Sue. She was wearing a beautiful dress.

"Where did you get that outfit?" I said. "I'd die for something that expensive." She grinned. "It's not expensive. Mom made it." "Your mother made that?" I asked, surprised.

"No, I'm not. Normally, I don't tell people, because you know how people feel about homemade clothes, but Mom used to be a professional seamstress. She can copy the most expensive designer clothes and no one can tell the difference."

"I'll remember that," I said.

When we got to our classroom, Mrs. Durshill had already started writing on the chalkboard. She usually got really angry if you came in after she had already started class, even if the last bell hadn't rung yet.

Sue and I slipped into the room as quietly as we could and headed toward our seats. I noticed that Carla Brett was giving me a dirty look. Carla Brett was the only bad thing about being on the cheerleading squad. She was the captain of the squad and everybody had told me that if she didn't like you, she made your life miserable. Even that hadn't stopped me from trying out. Now that I had made it, though, Carla would definitely have more of a say in my life.

Sue and I took our seats just as Mrs. Durshill turned around.

"Sue. Diane. I know you came in late," she said. "Do you have an excuse?"

I opened my mouth, but Sue said, "We were checking the list on Mr. Noremack's door. Diane made the cheerleading squad."

Several people in the class clapped.

Carla wasn't one of them.

"Well, all right, since cheerleading is a school activ-

ity, but you know how I feel about students coming in after class has begun."

We both nodded and tried to look as contrite as possible.

Actually, I didn't think it was fair, because all the other teachers waited until the second bell had rung to begin their classes. Not Mrs. Durshill. She had been at Grafton Elementary School forever, I had heard, so she pretty much did what she wanted to do.

Mrs. Durshill hadn't yet turned back around to the chalkboard. She was just staring into space. "I remember when I was a cheerleader," she said. She sighed. "Of course, that was quite a few years ago." Then she turned back around and started writing on the board again.

I wasn't quite sure I had heard Mrs. Durshill correctly. I leaned over to Sue. "Did she say she used to be a cheerleader?" I whispered.

"I think that's what she said," Sue whispered back. "But I just can't imagine her in a cheerleader's uniform, jumping up and down."

I couldn't either, and the image almost made me giggle, but I stopped myself just in time and started copying into my notebook the math problems Mrs. Durshill was writing on the board.

It was hard to concentrate, though, because I was still finding it difficult to believe that I had actually made the cheerleading squad.

We had just moved to Grafton at the beginning of the school semester, after Dad died. Mom had remembered what a pretty little town Grafton was. She told me that she and Dad had driven through here once and she had said that it seemed like a perfect town for a children's book writer to live in. I hadn't wanted to

move. I didn't want to leave my friends, and I just knew that I would get on the cheerleading squad at my old school. I was really upset about it. But I knew if Mom thought she could write her children's books better here we should do it.

When Mom brought me to enroll, though, I had seen the sign about cheerleading tryouts, so I signed up and went. There was only one vacancy to be filled, and it was to replace a cheerleader who had moved during the summer.

I thought I had done really well, because I had already been practicing at my old school, but you never know about new kids. Sometimes you're not accepted, even if you're better than the kids who've always gone to school there, but I had made it, and now I was officially one of the Grafton Elementary School's cheerleaders.

Unfortunately it also meant spending a lot of time with Carla Brett. She was the most hateful-acting person I had ever met in my life. The head cheerleader shouldn't be like that, I thought. She should be a leader.

I had also heard that Carla Brett didn't really care about schoolwork and that she almost hadn't made good enough grades to even be on the squad.

I sighed. It really didn't matter, though. I had already decided that I wasn't going to let Carla Brett stop me. She wasn't going to keep me from doing what I wanted. I stopped writing and looked over at her. She was looking at me! I shivered and turned away quickly. There was something about Carla Brett that was almost . . . evil! Whenever I was around her, the look in her eyes made me nervous. I sighed again. Too bad, I thought. Everything would be perfect if it weren't for Carla Brett.

I looked over at Sue. We had hit it off the first day of school. Sue was the exact opposite of Carla. Sue was

nice and friendly and got along with everyone, but she wasn't one of the cheerleaders and I knew from my other school that the cheerleaders usually stuck together. If you weren't a cheerleader or a pom-pom girl, you made other friends. That made me sad. Maybe that wasn't the way it was at Grafton Elementary School. I hoped nothing would happen to our friendship.

Unfortunately, things began to go wrong as soon as the lunch bell rang. "I'm hungry," Sue said. "I hope they have something good to eat."

"Me too," I said.

We stood up and started toward the classroom door. "Diane!"

I turned. Carla Brett was motioning with her finger for me to come to her.

"What does *she* want?" Sue whispered. "I'll go find out."

"I don't know," I whispered back. "I'll go find out." I walked over to where Carla was still sitting. "What do you want?" I said. I tried to keep my voice steady, but there was a slight tremble in it. I didn't want Carla to know for a minute that she intimidated me.

"I want to talk to you," Carla said. I started to sit down, but she stopped me. "You always stand when I'm addressing you," she snapped.

I stood back up and was immediately irritated at myself for allowing Carla to treat me this way. I didn't want to get started off wrong, though, so I remained standing.

"What do you want?" I repeated.

Carla stood up. "Now that you're a cheerleader, Diane, you're going to have to make some changes in your life."

"I know there'll be a lot of practices," I said, prepared for that.

"There are other things, too," Carla said. I didn't like the sound of that. "What do you mean?" Carla waved her hand. "There are rules and regulations. There are things you have to learn."

She was making this sound like some strange society. "When do I start learning them?" I asked. "Now. You'll be eating with the rest of us at the cheerleader table," Carla said. "Come along."

I blinked. I had planned to eat with Sue. Carla and the other cheerleaders in the room stared toward the classroom door. I turned and saw that Sue was still waiting for me. I shrugged. "We're going to have a meeting," I said. "I can't eat with you today."

Carla brushed past Sue without saying anything to her. "Hurry up, Diane!" she called to me over her shoulder.

I started for the door. I could tell by Sue's expression that she was hurt.

"I wanted to talk to you about this weekend," Sue said. "My mother said you could spend the night. I thought we could . . ."

"Diane!" Carla shouted from the hallway. "Now!"

I gulped. Why was I letting her do this to me, I wondered. I gave Sue a helpless look and hurried into the hallway.

Carla was waiting for me. Two of the other cheerleaders, Jeanna Kellogg and Abigail Davis, were standing beside her. They all had disgusted looks on their faces.

"I will not be kept waiting," Carla hissed at me.

"I'm sorry, but Sue and I had planned to eat together, so I had to tell her . . ."

"You didn't have to tell her anything," Carla interrupted me. "Now that you're a cheerleader, you don't have to explain anything to anyone who's not a cheerleader. Do you understand that?"

"Actually, Sue's a good friend of mine," I said, "so I'll probably be talking to her a lot."

Carla looked like she'd been slapped in the face. Jeanna and Abigail gasped. Carla began to turn all red, like she was holding her breath. Her eyes got very bright. She stared at me hard. All of a sudden, I was finding it hard to breathe. My throat felt like somebody was squeezing it. Stars began to appear before my eyes, and I felt like I was going to faint.

Then, just as suddenly, I heard Carla let out her breath, and I was all right. I leaned up against the wall. "What happened?" I managed to say.

Carla turned around sharply, and headed down the hallway, completely ignoring my question. "Follow us to the cafeteria," Abigail said, "and don't ever try that again."

When we got in line to get our trays, I found myself between Carla, Abigail, Jeanna, Mandy Manners, and Betsy Padgett. Mandy and Betsy were in Mr. Davenport's sixth-grade class. They had seemed nice at the cheerleading tryouts, when they were all watching me, but now they had scowls on their faces.

"What's wrong with her?" Betsy asked Jeanna.

Jeanna rolled her eyes. "Diane tried to talk back to Carla," she whispered.

"Oh, oh, bad mistake," Mandy said. She looked at me. "Carla is our leader. She's what's best for

the cheerleading squad. You aren't supposed to question her decisions."

Suddenly, my head was swimming. I felt like I was being brainwashed. I looked around the cafeteria. Everyone else was eating, talking, and enjoying themselves, but here I was standing between the other cheerleaders feeling as though I was a prisoner.

This was crazy. Why did I feel this way? I mean cheerleading is supposed to be fun. You're not supposed to feel like you're in some torture chamber, but it was exactly the way I felt. I wanted to escape. I wanted to run to the other side of the cafeteria where Sue was sitting by herself and tell her that I was sorry, that she was my best friend, and yes, yes, yes! I wanted to show her over Friday night. But my legs would only carry me a few steps forward in the food line.

Abigail handed me a tray. "I want the hamburgers and fries," she said to the server. She nodded toward me. "Give her the same thing."

The last thing I wanted was one of Grafton Elementary School's greasy hamburgers. In fact, the thought of it made me sick to my stomach, but since I had lost my appetite anyway, and didn't plan to eat any kind of food at all, I didn't protest. I was tired of fighting the cheerleaders for today. But I vowed that tomorrow things were going to change. This was a cheerleading squad. We were supposed to be happy. We were supposed to put the rest of the kids at Grafton Elementary School in the right spirit with our cheers. We weren't supposed to go around acting like we were better than everybody else in the school because we belonged to some weird secret society.

Finally, the six of us had our trays, and we headed toward the one empty table in the center of the cafeteria.

I noticed that everyone was looking at us. Something funny had begun to happen. They weren't looking at us the way I thought they'd be, kind of mad because these girls were stuck up and didn't want to associate with any of them. They were smiling at us, but it seemed forced. I had the strangest feeling that they were afraid of us.

Carla, Abigail, and Jeanna sat down on one side of the table. Mandy, Betsy, and I sat down on the other side of the table.

Carla was sitting opposite me. "Well, congratulations!" she said to me. Now she had a big smile on her face. "We're delighted you made the squad."

Everyone started acting all gushy toward me. I didn't understand their complete personality change. Then I suddenly realized it was just a show. We were in the center of the room and we were the center of attention. We were the "stars" of Grafton Elementary School. "We're having a meeting at my house after school today," Carla said. "We're going to try on our new uniforms."

I looked at Carla. "Do we have to buy them ourselves? We did at my other school."

"No. My mother is buying them for us. We get new ones each year," Carla said. "She bought these this past summer when I went to cheerleading camp. They're very special."

"Oh, that's wonderful," I said. At least I wouldn't have to spend almost all of my year's allowance to get mine, I thought.

"We're also going to practice some of the new cheers," Carla added.

"Are these the ones you learned at cheerleading camp this summer?" Abigail asked.

Carla nodded. "They are so great, too. They'll really help the students and the players get into the spirit of all the games."

For the rest of lunch period, they all ate their hamburgers and tried to guess what the new uniforms would look like. Carla just smiled secretly. She obviously relished her role as captain.

I moved my soggy french fries around on my plate and drank sips of water.

From time to time, I would catch Carla looking at me, smiling.

I took a deep breath. I could feel myself beginning to relax.

Had I been fair to her? I wondered. Maybe all Carla really wanted was for our cheerleading squad to be the best it could be. Maybe she planned on being a cheerleader in junior high and in high school and in college. I had seen those shows on television where cheerleaders compete for prizes and trophies. It was a big deal.

I made a decision. I would take a more positive attitude toward Carla and the whole cheerleading team. I would try to fit in instead of trying to fight them.

I looked over at Carla again. She was still looking at me, but this time she wasn't smiling, and I had the funniest feeling that she knew exactly what I had been thinking.



Mom dropped me off at Carla Brett's house about fifteen minutes after I was supposed to be there. She had an errand to do on the way, she told me, and it was silly not to do it. Carla wouldn't mind, she was sure. Maybe not, I thought. But I still felt uneasy about our relationship. If Mom ever found out how Carla had treated me earlier that day, she probably wouldn't even let me be on the squad, and I couldn't stand the thought of that!

I'd just have to be late and hope Carla wouldn't be angry.

When we finally pulled up into Carla's driveway, I jumped out of the car with a quick "I'll call you when we're through."

Carla's house was huge.

We lived in a nice house, too, but Carla's was enormous.

I guess I should expect her to act the way she always does, I thought, as I headed up to the front door.

Just as I was about to ring the doorbell, though, the door opened. Carla was standing there, smiling.

I have to admit that I was surprised. I had expected her to bawl me out.
"I'm sorry I'm late," I said, trying to sound out of breath, "but my mother had . . ." I stopped. Carla had on the most beautiful cheerleading uniform I had ever seen. I was so stunned I couldn't even talk.

"Don't worry about it," Carla said. "Come on in." She turned and started walking away. I closed the door behind me and followed her. "We're all in the den," she said over her shoulder.

It seemed to take forever to get to the den. I couldn't imagine living in a house this large. I'd get lost. When we finally got there, everybody else had on their uniforms, too.

"Oh, Carla! They're beautiful!" I finally managed to say.

"I was hoping you'd like them," Carla said.

"Yes! Yes! I really do," I said.

"Well, go put yours on, then, so we can start practicing," Abigail said. "The bathroom's down that hall." She pointed to the other side of the room, where it opened onto a hallway.

I took the box she handed me and hurried down the hall.

"It may be a bit long, but it can be altered," Carla called after me. "When Mom bought the uniforms for us, we all thought Janet would be on the squad."

Carla said it matter-of-factly. It didn't sound like she was irritated or was thinking that it was all my fault. I had heard from Sue that Janet George was supposed to be the cheerleading captain this year, but for some reason her parents had moved before school started. Sue had also told me that Janet and Carla were like twins. I couldn't imagine two Carla Bretts in one school!

When I got there, I saw that the bathroom was huge, too, just like the whole house.

I took the uniform out of the box. It even felt expensive. There was a beautiful sweater with a sparkling "G" on the front. The whole uniform was a mix of red, black, and white. I was getting so excited about everything. What had happened this morning between Carla and me was beginning to seem like a bad dream.

I put on the uniform as fast as I could. It was a bit loose in a couple of places, but it wasn't all that bad. It certainly wouldn't be a problem to take it in here and there.

I went back down the hall and stopped in the opening to the den.

The rest of the girls were all lined up. When they saw me, they broke into applause.

I bowed. Then I ran over to join them.

"You look great," Carla said.

"It's a little loose, but I can take care of it." I jumped up and down. "I love it. I still can't believe how beautiful it is."

"Well, let's get started, then," Carla said. "I want you to practice some of the new cheers in your new uniforms."

There was an open space in front of the huge fireplace that would allow us plenty of room to practice our cheers. We could even jump around a lot without hitting the furniture. This was going to be a perfect place to practice. It was cool, which meant we wouldn't have to get all hot and sweaty, like we would if we were practicing outside. This may sound really strange for a cheerleader to say, but I just hate getting hot and sweaty! I also didn't want to get my uniform dirty right away!

Carla handed us each a piece of paper.

"This is one of the new cheers I learned at cheerleading camp this summer," she said. I looked at what was typed on the paper. It certainly didn't look like any cheer I had ever heard.

Betsy turned to me. "Carla went to the Secret of the Art of Ancient Cheerleading School Camp. It's very expensive. They only take certain girls."

"Oh, that's great," I said. Actually, it was news to me that cheerleading was an ancient art and that it had secrets! I turned and smiled at Carla. "Congratulations," I said.

Carla smiled back. "It's one of the best cheerleading camps in the whole world," she said. Then she turned to the rest of the cheerleaders. "Okay, girls, positions!" she shouted.

We all came to attention.

"Now, repeat after me and watch my moves," Carla said. "RAH! RAH! POW! POW! THUNDER AND LIGHTNING STRIKE THEM NOW!"

We cheered,

*"RAH! RAH!
POW! POW!
THUNDER AND LIGHTNING
STRIKE THEM NOW!"*

All of a sudden, through the window across the room, I saw a bolt of lightning flash across the sky, followed by a loud clap of thunder. It gave me a really funny feeling, like I was in a weird dream.

I looked around, but no one else seemed to have noticed.

"That was pretty good, but let's do it again," Carla said.

"Is that it?" I said. "It's kind of short."
"But it's powerful," Carla said. "It means that our football team is like a thunderstorm, and that when we're on the field, we're full of thunder and lightning, and we'll strike the other team down."

"Oh. Okay. I see," I said. Actually, I really didn't see, and I thought it was a dumb cheer, but I wasn't going to say that to Carla and the rest of the squad. We practiced it a few more times, changing our hand and leg movements until Carla thought it was just right. Outside, it had started to rain really hard. Sometimes, the thunder and lightning made it almost impossible for us to hear ourselves, but nobody but me seemed to notice.

Finally, Carla announced, "I think we're ready to try it out tomorrow."

The rest of the girls jumped up and down. "Tomorrow?" I said.

"Our football team has its first game against Carlson Elementary School," Carla said.

"Oh," I said. "I didn't know it'd be so soon."
"We need to make sure we're ready," Carla said.

"It's important that we fire up the players!"

I just hoped we did some cheers I knew.

"Do you have any more of the new ones?" Betsy asked. "I really like these."

"Yes, but we'll save the rest of them for next time," Carla said. "Let's practice some of the old cheers now."

Well, I hope these are a little more normal, I thought. They were. I recognized all of them.

These were all about getting the ball and blocking the kicks and spelling out Grafton and yelling DEFENSE! DEFENSE! I began to feel more like a real cheerleader.

Finally, practice was over. I was the first one to leave, which made me feel like I was still an outsider, but my Mother got there first. "Be sure to wear your uniform to school tomorrow," Carla called to me as I ran toward Mom's car. "When ever there's a game, we wear our uniforms all day." "Okay!" I called back to her. We did the same thing at my old school.

But when Mom pulled out of Carla's driveway, I remember thinking how odd it was that there were storm clouds in the sky when I had gone into Carla's house and I didn't see any now. It was a bright sunny day.

"Well, how was it?" Mom asked.

"It was fine. We learned a new cheer. We also practiced some of the ones I already knew."

"See? Moving to Grafton wasn't so bad after all, was it?"

"I guess not."

"I wish your friend Sue was a little more outgoing. Maybe she could have made the cheerleading squad, too."

"Yeah, that's too bad."

Or was it? I wondered. Now that I was out of Carla's house and away from all the other girls, I felt like I had been in a dream. It was so unreal. I suddenly wanted to talk to Sue about what had happened.

I didn't want to tell Mom that there was something really strange about the cheerleading squad, and that I doubted if Sue would have wanted to be in it, anyway.

When I got home, I went to my room and called Sue right away. But her line was busy.

It stayed busy for a half hour.

When I finally reached her, I said, "I've been trying to get through for the longest time."

"I was on the phone with Derrick."

"Who's Derrick?"

"He's that high school guy who lives across the street from us. His parents own the dry cleaners here in town. Anyway, Derrick's really awful in math. If I don't help him, he'll flunk out of high school."

"You mean you're helping a senior with his math?"

"What can I say, Diane? I'm just really good at math," Sue said. "So tell me. How did cheerleading practice go?"

"I'm not sure."

"You're not sure?"

"Something really strange happened when I was there. It made me feel kind of weird."

"What are you talking about, Diane? It was just cheerleading practice."

"I know. I know. It's just this . . ." All of a sudden, I decided that I was sounding really weird myself. Sue was right. It was just a cheerleading practice. "You're right. Forget it. I'm just being silly about it, anyway. Do you want to come over so we can do our homework together?"

"I'd like that. I just don't understand this science experiment we're supposed to do."

"Okay. I'll help you with the science experiment and you can help me with math. Deal?"

"Deal!"

It only took Sue a couple of minutes to come over from her house next door.

When she got there, though, my mind was back on the cheerleading practice. I had to tell Sue what had happened.

But first I showed her my new uniform.
"Oh, it's beautiful, Diane. You'll look great in it," Sue said. "What's weird about this?"
"It's not the uniform I'm worried about," I said. "It's what happened after we had the uniforms on that's bothering me."

"What happened?"
"Well, Carla gave us this new cheer. Get this, too. She learned it at the Secrets of the Art of Ancient Cheerleading School Camp she went to. I've never heard of the place."

"It sounds like a rip-off to me. What was the cheer?"
I took a deep breath. "You'll probably think it's just silly."

"Probably," Sue said, "but then I think the whole thing is silly."

That hurt, coming from Sue. I loved cheerleading and I suddenly wondered how much of what she was saying was sour grapes. "Well, it was 'RAH! RAH! POW! POW! THUNDER AND LIGHTNING STRIKE THEM NOW!'"

Sue thought about it for a minute, then she said, "Well, I've never heard it before, but I don't think it's weirder than the rest of the cheers."

"The weird part isn't the cheer, Sue. It's what happened outside after we performed it," I said. "It started to thunder and there was lightning too."

Sue just stared at me. "What are you talking about? It didn't rain this afternoon."

"It did at Carla's," I said. "We had a really bad storm."

Sue stared at me some more. "You're not making this up, are you?" she finally said. "You're really serious about this."

I nodded.

"It has to be some weird weather phenomenon, then," Sue finally said. "There's no other explanation."
"Well, I know it can rain in one place and not in another just a few miles away," I finally agreed. "Exactly," Sue said. She looked at her watch. "We need to do our homework."

"You're right," I agreed.
We got out our books and spread ourselves out on my bed, but my mind wasn't on studying. It was on what had happened at Carla's house, after we had cheered that cheer. I could tell that it was on Sue's mind, too.

The next morning, I put on my cheerleader uniform, just like Carla had asked, but as soon as I got to school, I knew something was wrong. All of the other cheerleaders seemed really nervous about something. They kept asking Carla to repeat the thunder and lightning cheer. I couldn't believe they couldn't even remember one line!

"What's going on here?" Sue whispered to me on the way to the lunchroom.

"I'm not sure," I said.

"The only other cheerleader besides you who could answer Mrs. Durshill's questions this morning was Carla," Sue said. "Jeanna and Abigail are basket cases."

"I know," I said. "Mandy and Betsy were acting the same way at the playground before school started."
"You'd think that some really important Hollywood director was going to be here today to watch their performance," Sue said sarcastically.

I didn't say anything. I had begun to think that whatever it was would change my life forever.

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The football game against Carlson started an hour after school was out. Mrs. Brett drove all of us over to the football field in her van.

"They let the sixth-grade football teams play on the junior high field," Carla said proudly. "I think it's really neat."

"Yeah. It's better than that place they had to play on in the fifth grade," Abigail agreed.

"There it is!" Mandy cried.

I looked out the window. I wasn't all that impressed by what I saw. There were some metal benches on each side of the field and metal goalposts at each end. From the way the rest of the girls had been talking, I had been expecting an Olympic-sized stadium!

Mrs. Brett stopped the van behind one set of metal stands. "This is our side, girls," she said.

Carla opened the doors and we all jumped out. Mrs. Brett had also bought pom-poms in the school colors for each of us, and we went running toward the front of the stands, yelling and waving our pom-poms in the air. The teams were already warming up at opposite ends

of the field. There were several parents sitting on the metal benches.

Well, at least we'll have someone to cheer to, I thought. I'd been at football games where the cheerleaders were the only ones there and just cheered to the players.

"Let's get started, girls," Carla called to us. "We need to let our team know we support them!"

"Right!" everyone cried.

We lined up, facing the parents from our school. Then we spelled out "Grafton."

The only person in the stands who paid any attention to us was a little girl with blond hair.

We did one more cheer, then turned our attention to the field, where the game was about to start.

"Come on, Bobby!" Jeanna shouted.

"Come on, Joe!" Betsy shouted.

Bobby Maxwell was our kicker, and Joe Barber was holding the ball for him.

Bobby ran toward the ball and kicked it really high, but a player from Carlson grabbed it on the run and started toward our goal. He was bigger than our players, so it was easy for him to run past all of them. He scored a touchdown, then their kicker kicked an extra point and all of a sudden it was 7-0.

"We need to cheer louder," Mandy said. "Maybe they can't hear us."

"They can hear us," I said. "The problem is that the Carlson team is bigger."

I looked over at Carla. She was pacing up and down the sidelines. She seemed really upset. Once in a while, she'd look up at the sky. Something about what was happening was making me nervous.

All of a sudden, she said, "We're going to cheer a new cheer."
The rest of the girls looked at each other and wondered. I suddenly like I wasn't part of the squad.

"Ready, girls?" Carla said.
The girls started lining up, but I stayed where I was.
"Get in line, Diane!" she commanded.
She was suddenly the old Carla. There was something scary about the way she was acting now.

"Why don't we just cheer the regular cheers?" I asked.
"They're good."
"Get in line, I said!" Carla repeated.

Her eyes seemed to bore into me, and I found myself moving toward where the other cheerleaders were standing. It was like I couldn't help myself. Something was almost pulling me toward them.

I took my place between Jeanna and Betsy. I looked at them, but they were looking straight ahead, totally focused on Carla.

"Ready?" Carla shouted.
"Ready!" everyone else called back to her.

I couldn't get the words out of my mouth.
"We all have to be ready," Carla said. She was looking straight at me. "I'll ask you all again. Ready?"

"Ready!" we repeated.
This time I joined in. It was like I had no control over what I was saying.

Carla took her stance.
We followed her lead.

"RAH! RAH! POW! POW!" we cheered. "THUNDER AND LIGHTNING STRIKE THEM NOW!"

All of a sudden, above us, there was a rumbling

sound. I looked up. The sun was still shining, but black clouds had appeared out of nowhere and were hovering over the football field. A bolt of lightning flashed across the sky.
I looked back at Carla. She was looking directly at me. Now she had a smile on her face.
"Again!" Carla cried.
We took our stances again. "RAH! RAH! POW! NOW! THUNDER AND LIGHTNING STRIKE THEM

The thunder began to get louder. More and more streaks of lightning flashed above us.
On the field, the game was still going on. In fact, Carlson had just scored a second touchdown. It was now 14-0 in their favor.

I noticed some of the Carlson coaches looking up at the sky. At first, I thought they might cancel the game, but then I remembered that football games hardly ever got canceled for any reason. It would have to get really bad before they'd do that.

Our team had lined up to receive their kickoff.
"Come on, Tim!" Carla shouted. "You can do it!"
"Who's Tim?" I whispered to Mandy.
"Tim Wilson. Carla's boyfriend," Mandy said.
"He's going to receive Carlson's kickoff this time."

"Coach Arthur should have put him in earlier," Carla said. "He's the best player on the team."
I doubted that, but I didn't say anything. Even I knew that the coaches usually played the best players.
Carlson kicked off. Tim caught the ball and started running up the field, but one of their big men was after him.

Suddenly, a streak of lightning flashed in front of

their player, and he stopped running. That allowed Tim to continue down the field toward Carlson's goal.

But another one of their players was running toward him.

"Tim's not going to make it!" I cried.

Then a second bolt of lightning came down from one of the black clouds and struck their player's feet. He fell to the ground.

Now there was no one to catch Tim. He scored.

"Come on, girls! Cheer!" Carla cried. "Tim made a touchdown!"

"We can't cheer! Their player was just struck by lightning!" I said. He was still on the ground. "He could be seriously hurt!"

The Carlson coaches had run out onto the field and were huddled around the player. They seemed to be talking to him. Suddenly, the player sat up, then he stood up, and the coaches started helping him off the field.

"See. There's nothing wrong with him," Carla said. She started jumping up and down, yelling, "We want another touchdown! We want another touchdown!"

The rest of the cheerleaders joined in.

I didn't feel like cheering, though, so I just stood there, wondering if our cheer had had anything to do with what had happened.

It's just like yesterday, at Carla's house, I thought. We cheered this new cheer, and the same thing happened. We had a bad storm with thunder and lightning.

On the field, the game had resumed.

We kicked off to them, and their biggest player fielded the ball and started running toward our goal. He was knocking all of our players out of the way. You could tell he was really mad about something.

"Places, cheerleaders!" Carla shouted. We got into our stances.

"Cheer!" Carla shouted.

"RAH! RAH! POW! POW!" we cheered. "THUNDER AND LIGHTNING STRIKE THEM NOW!"

Then it happened.

A bolt of lightning flashed from the black clouds above us, right in front of the player with the ball. He tried to dodge it, but the bolt of lightning kept trying to strike him.

"What's going on here?" I cried.

The player with the ball was now running in circles all over the field. The bolt of lightning kept following him. Each time it tried to strike, the player would duck. Finally, the bolt of lightning chased the player off the field, and the referee blew the whistle.

There was a frantic huddle on the other side of the field. The player who was carrying the ball was jumping up and down. He kept pointing to the sky.

All of the people in the stands were on their feet now. They couldn't believe what they had just seen.

"Will somebody tell me what's happening?" I said. I looked over at Carla.

Carla didn't answer me. She was looking toward the playing field. She had a big smile on her face.

"Is the game over or what?" Mandy asked.

"I'll go find out," Abigail said.

"Abigail!" Carla shouted.

Abigail turned.

Now Carla had a fierce look on her face.

I noticed that Abigail swallowed before she said, "What's wrong?" Her voice was trembling.

Carla hesitated for a minute, then she said, "Nothing."

Abigail ran over to where our coach was huddled with our team.
I saw her say something to our coach.
Then she ran back over to us.

"The other team wants to forfeit the game," Abigail said. "They're afraid of the lightning."
"Let them forfeit," Carla said. "That means we win."

"It won't be much of a victory," I said. "Our team didn't win. The lightning did."
"It doesn't matter," Betsy said. "What matters is that our school won the game."

Coach Arthur met with the other head coach in the middle of the field. They talked for a couple of minutes. Then they both ran back to their teams. After a short huddle, the teams started heading toward the school buses that were parked behind the metal stands.

"That's the weirdest thing I ever saw," I heard a man say, when we started toward Mrs. Brett's van. "It was like that lightning bolt was alive."

It may have been, I thought. I looked over at Carla to see her reaction to what the man was saying. She wasn't looking at him, but she had that smile on her face, like she knew exactly what had happened and why.

Sue came running up to me. "Are you all right?" she whispered. "I can't believe what happened. It's just like you said. It was so weird!"

"Hurry up, Diane!" Carla called to me. "Mom's waiting for us in the van."

"I'll call you when I get home," I whispered to her. "It shouldn't be too long."

By the time we reached the van, the dark clouds had disappeared, and once again it was a bright, sunny day. I made sure that I got a window seat. I wanted to look

outside, so I wouldn't have to look at any of the other cheerleaders. There was something really wrong here. I had always wanted to be a cheerleader, but this was something more than a cheerleading squad. This was a group of girls that seemed to possess evil powers.

Whoever heard of something like this happening? We were just cheerleaders, but it was like whatever we cheered came true. I took a deep breath and held it for several seconds. All I wanted to do now was to get home and think about what had just happened.

That was what I was thinking when I realized that we had pulled into the Brett's driveway.
"Oh! I thought you were taking me home!" I exclaimed.

"No, silly!" Carla said in her friendliest voice. "We always come over to my house after a game for snacks. It's a tradition."

"It's wonderful, too," Betsy said. "Mrs. Brett makes the best desserts."

All of the other girls agreed.
"We always have a short practice, too. We talk about what we did right and what we did wrong," Carla said.
"We look at the video of our performance and critique it."

"Video?" I said.
"Mom always films us," Carla said. "That's how we know what works and what doesn't work."

"It's fun watching it, too," Jeanna said. "It's like we're movie stars."

Oh, brother! I thought.

I could tell that Carla was looking at me. I turned to face her. "We also need to practice another one of the new cheers I learned at camp," she said.

That sent chills through me. I wondered what awful disaster we would make come true at our next game. Reluctantly, I followed everyone out of the van and up the front sidewalk to Carla's house.

They were all right about one thing. The desserts that Mrs. Brett served us were wonderful. They were like the kind you get in really fancy restaurants.

When we finished eating, Mrs. Brett put the video tape into the VCR, and we watched ourselves cheering on their big-screen television set.

"Oh, I look terrible!" Betsy squealed. But I could tell that she didn't really mean it.

Everyone kept saying, "No, you don't." That was the way it went until we got to the thunder and lightning yell, then everyone became silent—even Mrs. Brett. They didn't take their eyes off the television set.

I watched all of their reactions. For just a minute, it was as if time had stood still and I was the only one in the room. When the tape was over, everyone seemed tense. They all turned toward Carla. She was standing at the front of the room and had taken command again.

"I think it could have been better," she said, "but it accomplished its purpose."

Abigail nodded. "We won the game."

I shook my head. "Actually, we didn't really win the game," I said, "the other team had to forfeit."

"It's the same thing," Betsy said. "It goes on our record as a win."

"But we have to do better," Carla said. It came out more as a command than as a suggestion. "If that coach hadn't forfeited, then there's no telling what might have happened."

"We would just have had to keep cheering that cheer

until the lightning did what it was supposed to do," Mandy said.

I looked around at all of them. "I don't understand. What do you mean, *what it was supposed to do*?"

The girls looked at me, then they turned to Carla to find out how they should answer my question.

"I think you know what we mean. I don't think I need to explain any of this to you," Carla finally said.

"You wanted to be a cheerleader at any cost. You got your wish."

I turned to see what Mrs. Brett would say about her daughter's behavior, but she had disappeared.

How convenient, I thought.

"Okay. Let's get started," Carla said. "We have a new cheer to practice."

She passed out another sheet of paper. This one only had one cheer on it, too:

"THE GRASS IS GREEN.
THE GRASS IS MEAN.
THE GRASS WILL PULL YOU
FROM THE SCENE."

What in the world did that mean? I wondered. It didn't make a whole lot of sense, but I was sure that whatever it was something really awful was in store for the team that played us next.

"What do you think this new cheer means?" Sue asked me.

"I don't know for sure, but it'll be something awful." She thought for a minute. "Have you said anything to your mother yet?"

I shook my head. "If she knew about this, she'd make me leave the squad."

"I can't believe you really want to be a cheerleader after what happened today, Diane."

I didn't know how to respond to that yet. I had always dreamed of being a cheerleader. I was always trying to learn new cheers. I even watched football games on television just so I could see the cheerleaders on the sidelines.

Now, just when my dreams had come true, I had to be on a squad run by someone who was doing really weird stuff.

"Earth to Diane," Sue said. "Come in, please."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I was just thinking how mad I am about all of this. Carla and the rest of them are ruining my dream."

"Then let's do something about it," Sue said.

"Like what?"

"Let me think. There has to be a way to stop this from happening again."

"I don't know," Sue finally said. "The only things I can think of are illegal."

"I know what you mean," I said. "I've probably already thought of those myself."

"Maybe we could . . ."

"Wait a minute!" I cried. "I think I know where we could start."

"Where?"

"With Mrs. Durshill."

Sue blinked. "Why with her?"

"Remember when she mentioned in class that she used to be a cheerleader?"

"I can't believe she was really serious, though. Can you?"

I shrugged. "Well, I suppose all cheerleaders have to get old sooner or later."

Sue laughed. "I never really thought about it. I guess I just thought all cheerleaders stayed young and continued to practice their cheers year after year after year."

I laughed with her. I suddenly had the image of myself doing cheers when I was seventy or eighty years old.

"What'll we tell her?" Sue asked.

"I'll have to think about that," I said. "Whatever I tell her, I just want to make sure she doesn't go straight to Mr. Noremack."

"That might solve the problem," Sue said. "Carla and the other cheerleaders would be in real trouble, then, for sure."

"No, I don't think they would. Carla would just do everything, I'm sure, and then I'd be a laughingstock. You have to admit that the whole thing sounds crazy. I mean, get real. Who would believe that cheerleaders have the power to make things happen just by cheering them?"

"I guess you're right. We'll just have to drop him one at a time so that no one will suspect what we're doing."

"We'll start first thing Monday morning," I said. "That way maybe we can have a whole new cheerleading squad by Friday, when we play our next football game."

"I just may try out, if that happens," Sue promised. "Oh, would you?" I said. "That would be great."

"I'll have to think about it. It would go against everything I stand for."

"Oh, Sue! Don't knock it. It's really fun. Well, it is when you're not trying to make awful things happen to the players on the team."

Unfortunately, our plans didn't work out. It was Thursday afternoon before Mrs. Durshill was alone long enough for Sue and me to talk to her.

"Do you have a few minutes, Mrs. Durshill?" I said to her. "Sue and I want to talk to you about a problem."

Sue and I had stayed in our desks, after everyone had left, pretending that we were looking over our tests. Mrs. Durshill didn't mind if you stayed a few extra minutes after school to proofread your tests, as long as you didn't do it too often.

"If you're ready to hand in your tests, yes, I have a few minutes to talk to you girls."

Sue and I handed in our tests, then we sat in the two desks right in front of Mrs. Durshill's desk.

"What's the problem?" Mrs. Durshill asked. I had gone over this a million times in my head, so I was prepared to talk to her about what was happening, but now that she had asked the question, I wasn't sure what I was going to say.

Mrs. Durshill kept looking at me. "Do you want to talk about it, Diane?" she finally said.

"Did you say you were a cheerleader once?" Sue said.

Mrs. Durshill turned to her. "Oh, yes, yes, I was, and I had a wonderful time, too. But don't get me started talking about that. We're here to talk about your problem."

"Well, actually, it has to do with cheerleading," I finally said. "Something strange is happening."

"What do you mean something strange?" I had already said more than I had intended to, but maybe this was the best way. Maybe we really did need to take someone else into our confidence.

I took the plunge. "Carla Brett has these new cheers she's given us," I began, "and when we cheer them really weird things start to happen."

Mrs. Durshill bent her head and looked at me. "What do you mean, weird things?"

I told her about the football game and how the bolts of lightning seemed to be chasing the players from the other team.

"I heard some of the other teachers talking about that, but they were just remarking about how weird the weather was that day," Mrs. Durshill said. "They didn't say anything about what you had been cheering."

"They probably weren't paying attention," Sue said. "Most people don't pay any attention to what cheerleaders are saying. They're just there to watch the game." "What cheer are you talking about?" Mrs. Durshill asked.

"Rah! Rah! Pow! Pow! Thunder and Lightning Strike Them Now!" I said.

"That's a strange cheer," Mrs. Durshill said. "I thought it was, too, until the lightning attacked those football players from Carlson."

"You should hear the new cheer," Sue said.

"Well, what is it?" Mrs. Durshill asked.

"Tell her, Diane," Sue said. I took a deep breath. "The grass is green. The grass is mean. The grass will pull you from the scene."

Mrs. Durshill frowned. "That is strange," she said. "Whatever happened to 'Get that ball!' and 'Block that kick!'"

"Oh, we still cheer those," I said. "We only seem to use these new cheers for special occasions."

Mrs. Durshill didn't say anything for a minute. She seemed to be trying to decide what to do. Finally, she said, "Maybe I should talk to the principal about this."

"I don't think that's a good idea," I said. "Carla Brett is so popular that Mr. Noremack would probably just think I was trying to get rid of her so I could be cheerleading captain."

"You're probably right, Diane. But we certainly need to do something," Mrs. Durshill said. "I'll think about it overnight and maybe in the morning I'll have an idea of what we can do before the football game tomorrow."

"Oh, thank you, Mrs. Durshill. I feel so much better," I said. Sue and I stood up. We got all of our books together and left the classroom, but then stopped in our tracks. Carla Brett was standing across the hall looking at us.

"Oh, hi!" I managed to say. I knew it sounded really phony. "That was a harder test than I thought. Mrs. Durshill let us take more time on it."

"I thought it was a really easy test," Carla said. She stared at us both for a few more seconds, then turned and started down the hallway toward the exit.

Sue and I watched until she left the building. I didn't realize that I had been holding my breath. "Do you think she heard us talking to Mrs. Durshill?" "Even if she didn't, she's certainly suspicious about something," Sue said.

That didn't reassure me. "Well, she's not going to stop me from getting to the bottom of this," I said. "She may try to make my life miserable, but she can't stop me from being a member of the cheerleading squad."

I was trying to sound brave, but I was actually scared to death. I wondered if Carla had a cheer that would do away with cheerleaders like me who caused problems for her.

Sue and I didn't say much on the way home. I was just hoping that Mrs. Durshill could come up with a solution to our problem.

When Sue and I got to school the next morning, there was a substitute in our class. We'd had her once before. Her name was Mrs. Palmer.

"What happened to Mrs. Durshill?" I asked.
"I don't know," Mrs. Palmer said. "The principal called me this morning and asked me to substitute for her."

"I hear she's really sick," Sue and I turned around. Carla Brett had come into the room. Abigail was right behind her.
"How do you know that?" I asked.
"My father's a doctor. Carla said haughtily. "I heard about things like that." She gave me a very disdainful look. "That uniform doesn't look so good on you all. But at least you remembered to wear it."

Something awful was happening here. I could feel it in the air, and it was making me dizzy. It wasn't just about weird cheers. It was about something evil.
"You girls need to sit down," Mrs. Palmer said. She was looking right at Sue and me.

"Come on," Sue said. "It'll be all right."
It wasn't going to be all right, I knew, but I didn't feel like arguing with her in front of Mrs. Palmer and the rest of the class.

I sat down without looking at my seat and heard something crackle. I felt down on the seat and retrieved a folded piece of paper. It was a note, I was sure, but from whom?

Mrs. Palmer was explaining her rules. She sounded like she was going to be our teacher for more than just a few days. Was Mrs. Durshill really that sick? I wondered.

I looked around the room. Everyone else was either paying attention to the substitute or looking down at their desks. Nobody was looking at me.

I quickly unfolded the note.

Ask Carla why Janet George really left town.

I looked up to see if anybody was watching me read the note. Nobody was, yet somebody in the room had put it on my seat, I was sure.

I had been told that Janet George left town because her parents moved, but could there have been another reason? Had Carla created some problem for her? Would she create a problem for me that would force me and Mom to leave town? I shivered. I wasn't quite sure I wanted to ask Carla anything. In fact, the more I thought about it, the more I just wanted to forget everything that had happened and forget about being a cheerleader.

But I knew I couldn't.

Carla Brett was in possession of some cheers that could cause evil things to happen to people, and she had to be stopped.

I refolded the note and slipped it into my book bag. I needed to show this to Sue right away. But how? I wondered.

Then I had an idea. Right before we went to lunch, I'd pretend to have a question for Mrs. Palmer. I'd make eye contact with Sue so she'd know that I wanted to talk to her.

But Carla had other ideas.

Just before the lunch bell rang, Mrs. Palmer let Carla announce that all the cheerleaders had been given permission to eat early, so we could talk about what we were going to do during the game.

I wasn't going to let her get away with this.

"I thought we had already decided our plans for the game," I said to Carla loud enough so Mrs. Palmer could hear.

Carla gave me one of her hateful stares. "I've

changed my mind. The Captain of Cheerleading said, "I can't do that."

As it turned out, the lunch bell rang before we could all get our things together. I hung back to see if I could whisper something to Sue, but Carla kept motioning me to hurry up, so I followed the rest of the cheerleaders to the cafeteria.

Carla seemed furious, but she didn't take out any of her anger on me, thank goodness.

She didn't change anything we had already planned either, but this time I didn't say anything. I knew she just wanted to get me away from Sue.

I was sure now that she had heard us talking to Mrs. Durshill. I was wondering what she had done to Mrs. Durshill to make her so sick that she couldn't come to school.

Once again I didn't touch my food. I had completely lost my appetite.

In fact, for the rest of the afternoon, I was barely able to pay attention to what Mrs. Palmer was saying. Finally, school was out.

Mrs. Brett was waiting in the parking lot to take us to the football field.

I was the last one out to the van. I didn't feel like talking to anybody.

Carla had been walking with the other cheerleaders, but then she suddenly turned around and started walking toward me.

I was scared now.

I stopped walking and waited to see what was going to happen.

"You shouldn't have talked to Mrs. Durshill, Diane. You've created a very serious problem for her. I just hope she makes it."

For a minute, I couldn't speak. "What are you saying?" I finally managed. "What did you do to her?"

"You know the rules, Diane. You don't talk to anyone about what goes on in cheerleading practice. She's where she can't tell anyone what you told her."

I began to shiver. "What about . . ." I stopped. "What about Sue? What about, let's say, your mother? Is that what you were going to say?"

"No, no, I wasn't. Sue doesn't know anything. I haven't told her anything."

"You're lying, Diane, and you're not very good at it."

I could hardly get the words out. "What are you going to do to her?"

Carla just looked at me for a couple of seconds, then she grinned. "I'm not going to do anything, as long as you keep your mouth shut except when you're cheering. You will say nothing to anyone about what goes on during cheerleading practice. Is that understood?"

I nodded. I was defeated. I didn't know what else to do. If I ever talked about this to anyone else again, Carla would do something to make them all sick—or even worse!

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Carla gave me one last dirty look and headed toward the sidelines of the football field, where the rest of the cheerleaders were waiting.

I followed reluctantly. There was no way out of this mess that I could see now. If I didn't do what Carla said, she'd do something awful to Mom and Sue.

When I reached the sidelines, all of the girls were looking toward the end of the field, where our team had gathered.

"Come on, girls, we're going to lead them out onto the field," Carla said.

She started running toward the end zone.

The rest of us started running after her.

"We want to lead the team in, Coach Arthur!" Carla shouted.

Coach Arthur looked up. "I think that'd be a great idea, Carla. I'm glad you thought of it," he said. "Webster is a tough team, and we need all the inspiration that we can get."

"That's our job," Abigail said.

The rest of us agreed.

But I was finding it very hard to get excited. I kept

thinking about Mrs. Durshill and about the problems Carla said she'd cause Mom and Sue if I didn't do what she told me to do.

"We're ready to take the field, Carla," Coach Arthur said.

We all lined up in front of the team and held hands. "We'll lead the team to the center of the field," Carla said to us, "and then we'll head for the sidelines." Behind us, the members of the team were jumping up and down, butting helmets, and talking about how they were going to mop the field with Webster's players.

"Let's go!" Coach Arthur shouted. I was caught off guard and almost jerked down by Mandy, as we all began racing toward the center of the field.

There were quite a few of our parents in the stands, and they started cheering when they saw us coming. We weren't even halfway there but my sides were splitting. I could barely stand up. I was either really out of shape or the rest of the squad had superhuman strength.

I didn't dare stop, though, because I'd be trampled to death by our football team.

When we reached the center of the field, the football team stopped, but we didn't.

We turned abruptly and headed toward the sidelines. Our parents were really yelling now.

When we finally reached the sidelines, I thought I'd be able to catch my breath, but Carla immediately had us go into a cheer.

"TWO BITS, FOUR BITS, SIX BITS, A DOLLAR!
ALL FOR GRAFTON, STAND UP AND HOLLER!"

We followed that with several cartwheels and a lot of jumping.

Finally, we stopped.

I was ready to throw up.

I almost had to laugh, knowing how Carla would feel about that, especially if I got it all over my uniform. On the field, our team was just about ready to kick off to Webster.

We all grabbed hands and went into our drum roll cheer, which consisted mainly of each of us trying to sound like a drum. When Bobby kicked the ball, we all shouted BOOM!

The kick went into the end zone, but Webster's player decided to run it back. Our players missed a couple of tackles, and their player started up the sidelines.

"He's going to score a touchdown!" Abigail cried.

"They've got to stop him!"

"Positions, girls!" Carla shouted.

I turned and looked at her. Her eyes had that funny look in them. They made me want to run away from her as fast as I could.

"It's time for the new cheer," Carla said.

The other members of the squad nodded.

On the field, their runner was almost to the fifty-yard line.

"Ready!" Carla cried. "Cheer!"

"THE GRASS IS GREEN! THE GRASS IS MEAN!" we cheered. "THE GRASS WILL PULL YOU FROM THE SCENE!"

I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen what happened next.

Their runner was in the clear. None of our players was anywhere close to him, but all of a sudden, several

long blades of grass stood up almost straight in front of him, grabbed his ankles and pulled him to the turf. Behind us, there was a cheer from the stands. They were staring at the field. Carla had that evil smile on her face.

"Did you see that?" I called to her. "Did you see what that grass did?"

"What do you mean?" Carla said. "He tripped."

"He didn't trip," I said. "The grass grabbed his legs and pulled him down."

The rest of the squad started laughing. "Oh, Diane, you are so silly," Jeanna said. "Grass can't do things like that."

"I saw it," I insisted. I turned around to look at the people in the stands, but they weren't paying attention to us. They were watching the game.

Webster now had the ball on our forty-yard line. "Girls! Line up!" Carla shouted. "We're going to do the new cheer again!"

I knew my eyes hadn't deceived me. I had seen it. The blades of grass in front of the runner had jumped up at him, grabbed his legs, and pulled him to the turf. I wondered if he had even realized what had happened. He had probably been so intent on reaching the goal line that he hadn't been looking down. He probably just thought he had tripped on the grass and fallen.

Nobody on Webster's team seemed to be arguing with anybody about it, so they either hadn't seen it or just couldn't believe what they were seeing.

Webster's team lined up again.

Their quarterback got down under the center.

He called the play.

He dropped back.

The player who had been pulled down by the grass went out for a long pass.
Our players were fooled by the play and had tackled another player.
The quarterback threw the ball long, and the Webster player caught it.

Once again, he was all by himself on the field, heading toward our end zone.
"Oh no you don't!" Carla shouted at him between clenched teeth. "Places, girls! You know what the cheer is!"

I stood where I was. I wasn't going to do this again. Their team was better than our team, and they deserved to win. We shouldn't be doing this.
Carla looked at me. "If you don't cheer, Diane, Mr. Durshill may never come back to school!"

I swallowed hard. I knew Carla meant exactly what she had said.
"Hurry!" Carla screamed. She was looking toward the field. The Webster player had reached our twenty-yard line.
"Cheer, girls!" Carla screamed.

*"THE GRASS IS GREEN!
THE GRASS IS MEAN!
THE GRASS WILL PULL YOU
FROM THE SCENE!"*

Suddenly, the grass in front of the runner jumped at him, wrapping itself around his ankles and pulling him toward the ground, but this time it didn't just stop there. It continued to wrap itself around his legs and arms until he couldn't move. We could hear his screams for help from the sidelines.

For just a minute, the other members of Webster's team just stood there, watching in horror, as the grass wound itself tighter and tighter around the runner.
"We've got to help him," I cried. "It's probably choking him."
"He shouldn't have tried to score against us," Carla said. She continued to stare with that awful evil smile on her face.
"Isn't anybody going to help him?" I was looking around frantically.

Finally, the Webster coach and the other members of their team realized what was happening and started running toward their player, but as they stepped onto the field, the grass jumped up and started wrapping itself around them.

Now they were all screaming.
The blades of grass had some of the Webster players by the wrists and were trying to pull them down. It had others by their legs and was trying to do the same thing.
The Webster coach was dodging attacking blades of grass as he weaved his way across the playing field.
"Well, I'm going to help them!" I shouted.
"Diane!"

I turned around and saw Sue running from the stands toward me. Suddenly, the grass in front of her jumped up, grabbed her by the arms and legs, and pulled her down.

"Sue!" I screamed.

I turned to Carla. "You're evil!"

But Carla was looking toward the other side of the field, where the parents from Webster were pouring out of the stands and onto the playing field.

I ran toward Sue.

By now the grass had wrapped itself tightly around

her arms and legs and had started wrapping itself around her throat.

"Help me, Diane," she managed to say. "Help me!" I began pulling at the grass that was curling itself around Sue's neck. I couldn't believe how tough it was. It was a struggle, but I finally got the grass off Sue's neck, and she raised her head up off the ground.

"Hurry! Hurry!" she cried. She looked around. "What is going on here?"

"It's happening again, Sue," I whispered. "What we're cheering is coming true!"

Finally, I freed Sue's arms and legs and she stood up. "Oh, Diane! Look!" Sue was pointing across the field.

I turned. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. The grass along the opposite side of the playing field had started attacking the Webster parents as they were trying to rescue their football team.

The blades of grass were grabbing at the arms and legs of all the parents and pulling them to the ground. Once it had them on the ground, it began wrapping itself tightly around them.

"Come on!" I cried.

Sue and I started racing across the field. In the distance, I could hear sirens.

Then I saw several of our parents running across the field, too. That made me feel better.

Carla and the rest of the cheerleaders were still standing on the opposite side of the field. I was sure that Carla wouldn't try anything else, now that some of Grafton's parents were over there trying to help.

The first person we reached was a woman whose legs were completely bound together by the grass.

"We'll help you," Sue said to her.

We both dropped to our knees. Sue started pulling the grass from one leg and I started pulling from the other.

"What is going on here?" the woman managed to say. "The grass has gone crazy. I've never seen anything like it."

I was wondering what she'd say if I told her it was all because of a cheer we had done. She'd probably think I was crazy. I was sure that's what everyone else would think, too, and I was also sure that that was probably what Carla was counting on. Who in their right mind would ever think that cheerleaders could make such a thing happen?

Well, I had news for them. The cheerleaders from Grafton Elementary School could make anything happen just by cheering about it!

We finally freed the woman, and she raced over to where her son was almost completely covered by grass. Sue and I started helping whoever we could.

Everyone was in shock, including the parents from Grafton.

Unfortunately, that shock began to turn to anger.

"We'll never play Grafton again!" Webster's coach shouted.

"Yeah!" one of their parents yelled. "I think you people are weird!"

"You're right there," another parent said. "We heard about that last game, where the lightning chased the players around the field."

"We thought it was just a coincidence," the Webster coach said. "Now we know it wasn't."

Finally, the grass has been pulled away from all the players and the parents. The people from Webster left the field without further comment.

"You'll have to admit it's kind of weird," one of Grafton parents said, as we headed back across the street. I almost said something, but Sue knew what I was thinking and shook her head.

"We have to solve this problem ourselves," I whispered to me.

"How?" I whispered back. "The only thing I've accomplished is to make Mrs. Durshill very sick and put you and Mom in danger."

I could see Sue bristling. "Don't worry about me," she said. "I can take care of myself."

I don't think so! I wanted to say to her. Not with someone as powerful as Carla Brett calling the shots. But I kept quiet.

"Oh, oh," Sue whispered.

I looked up.

Carla and the rest of the cheerleaders were heading my way.

"You'd better go," I whispered to Sue. "I'll call you later."

"She doesn't scare me," Sue persisted.

"I know, but it'll be easier on me if you aren't here."

"Okay," Sue reluctantly agreed.

She veered away from me and headed toward the metal stands.

When the rest of the squad reached me, they made a circle around me.

"You never desert the squad, Diane. That's a hard and fast rule," Carla said. "You could get kicked off the squad for doing that."

I didn't say anything.

The rest of the squad members just stared at me.

"You're all to wear your uniforms to school on Monday," Carla said. "I have a surprise planned."

Then she turned and started toward her mother's van. The other cheerleaders followed.

Reluctantly, I followed too, because I needed a ride home. But I kept wondering what the surprise would be. Would she give us another cheer to learn? And how would people be attacked this time?

I sighed heavily. Carla wouldn't tell me, I was sure. I'd just have to wait until Monday to find out.

As we drove away from the football field, Mandy asked the question I had been wanting to ask.

"I thought we were only supposed to wear our uniforms on the days that we had games. Why do we have to wear them Monday?"

Carla gave her a hard stare. "Because we're cheerleaders," she finally said. "We're responsible for the school spirit."

I didn't think that was much of an answer, but I didn't say anything. Neither did Mandy.

"Mine's too tight," Betsy whined. "I think I got the wrong size."

I looked over at her. I knew she hadn't gotten the wrong size. She had just been eating too much candy.

Carla ignored Betsy's comment. "It's important that everyone in school know who we are and what we can do," she added.

This wasn't sounding good at all. I couldn't believe that the rest of the kids in school didn't already know who we were. In fact, with Carla as our leader the rest of the kids at school stayed out of our way. We were allowed to get away with things, because cheerleaders

were considered important to school spirit. I wanted us to be like the cheerleaders at other schools I had known. But I was sure this wasn't the place to talk about that. The rest of the girls just bowed their heads. They obviously felt embarrassed that they hadn't realized this. What did Carla have in mind? Did she now plan to create the same havoc in our classroom that she had created on the football field? Whatever it was, it wouldn't be anything good, I was sure.

I just couldn't let it happen. I vowed right then and there that I had to stop her before Monday arrived, no matter what she threatened to do to Sue and Mom! If I could only figure out how to do it.

I was surprised when Mrs. Brett stopped at my house to let me out. Then I realized that Carla had probably told her I needed to go straight home and wouldn't be eating dessert and watching the video of our performance at the game. I no longer really cared, though. I just wanted to get away from them.

"Thanks for the ride, Mrs. Brett," I said as I got out of the van.

"You're welcome, Diane," Mrs. Brett said. She always seemed so friendly. I wondered how she could have as awful a daughter as Carla. Of course, it could just be an act. She might really be just as awful as Carla.

"Remember. Wear your uniform Monday," Carla reminded me.

"I won't forget," I said.

I turned and started up the sidewalk toward my house. Just then something moved in the bushes.

I stopped.

"Who's there?"

I couldn't imagine who would be hiding there. Suddenly, Sue's head appeared.

"You scared me half to death," I said. "What are you doing hiding in the bushes?"

"I was just on my way over to see if you were at home when I saw Carla's van pull into your driveway," Sue said. "Mom's using the telephone, so I couldn't call."

"Well, come on inside. I have a lot to tell you."

"I'm home, Mom," I called as we walked in the house.

Mom appeared from her office. "I'm sorry I didn't make it this time, sweetheart, but I got stuck trying to fax this chapter to New York. My editor's fax line was busy."

"That's okay. Anything to eat?"

"Check the refrigerator, but don't ruin your appetite. We're going out to eat. I got so busy with this chapter that I forgot to thaw anything."

I looked at Sue and grinned. Mom said this almost every evening, like going out to eat was a big surprise.

"Is it all right if Sue goes with us?"

"Of course. I think that's a great idea."

Mom really liked Sue, because Sue was always suggesting great plots for Mom's books. She wanted to be a writer, too, so she didn't mind listening to Mom talk about her books all the time.

"Let's go up to my room," I said to Sue. I started toward the stairs.

Sue was right behind me.

"Oh. I forgot," Mom said. "We can also stop at the hospital to see Mrs. Durshill."

I stopped and turned.

"What do you mean?"

"Mrs. Durshill's doctor called this afternoon and

wanted to know if you could go by and see her. She keeps asking for you."

I could feel the chills starting to go through me. "I don't understand."

"Actually, the doctor didn't either. Evidently, it took him and the other members of the staff quite a while to figure out what she was saying. Then it occurred to one of them that it might be the name of one of her students. They contacted the school and your name was the closest to what she was saying. They think that maybe you could help them understand some of the other things she's been saying. Evidently, she's very sick."

"Okay. That sounds like a good idea. I really do want to see how she is."

Sue and I hurried upstairs.

"Can you believe this? Mrs. Durshill probably wants to tell us what Carla did to her to make her sick," I said. "If we can prove this, then we'll be able to stop Carla. They might not believe me, but they'll believe Mrs. Durshill!"

When we got to my room, we plopped down on the bed. "We've got to stop her. We've got to stop Carla before she hurts a lot of people."

"Why can't people realize what's happening? First there was lightning that chased the players all over the field. Today, the grass attacked them. What's it going to take?"

"People know something's happening, but they just don't associate it with the cheerleaders. They probably think it's some weird scientific phenomenon. I mean, lightning does strange things, and there are plants around the world that grow fast and that grab insects and eat them."

"Yeah, but they don't grab humans!"
"Nobody knows that for sure. Maybe this grass is a mutation. After all, these things do happen sometimes. I suppose people can't believe it's happening in our town."

"We know what's really behind it, though. Carla and her weird cheers."
"Nobody'd believe that, Sue. We have to find a way of stopping it without telling people the cheerleaders are making it happen."

We lay on my bed for several minutes trying to think up some solution, but we couldn't think of anything. Finally, I turned on the television set to a game show, thinking that it might relax us and help us think up something, but all it did was numb my mind.

Finally, Mom called, "You girls ready?"
"Oh, I haven't cleared this with my parents yet," Sue said. She grabbed my receiver and called her house. She had to argue for several minutes, which she's very good at doing, but she was finally able to convince her parents that eating with me tonight was one of the most important things in her life.

I suddenly realized that I hadn't even changed out of my cheerleader uniform.

"Ready, girls?" Mom called. "We need to hurry."
"I hate to wear this out in public," I said. "I don't associate it with pleasant activities."

"I know what you mean," Sue said, "but don't worry about it." She grinned. "Maybe your mother will take us someplace where nobody knows what it is!"

We hurried downstairs.

Mom was waiting for us at the front door. "Didn't you change?"

"We got busy talking," I said. "I don't mind if you don't mind."
Mom shrugged. She had never understood why I wanted to be a cheerleader in the first place. She would have identified more with a daughter like Sue. It's always funny to me how parents and kids can often be so different from each other.

We got into Mom's car, and she backed out of the driveway.

"Where do you want to eat?" I said to Sue.
"Let me see." She started thinking. Sue's family never seemed to eat out. She said her Mom was a great cook and they could never find a restaurant that prepared meals as good as hers. I told her once that was usually not the point of eating out.

Mom looked at her watch. "I think we'd probably better stop at the hospital first. If we wait until after we eat, it might be past visiting hours."

Sue and I looked at each other and frowned. We were both getting hungry, but Mom didn't like to be rushed when she ate, so I thought she was probably right. The Grafton Hospital doesn't really look like a hospital, because it's had so many additions added on, but Mom said that for a relatively small town, it's a pretty good facility.

We finally found a parking place and headed toward the front entrance.

The nurse at the desk gave us directions to Wing C where Mrs. Durshill's room was.

"You need to check with the nurse at that station first, though, since she's not supposed to have many visitors."

After walking for what seemed like miles, we finally arrived at Wing C.

"Oh, yes," the nurse said brightly, when Mom told our names. She looked at my uniform. "Cheerleaders?" I nodded. I couldn't tell by her question how she felt about cheerleaders, but I was beginning to feel conscious about having my uniform on. Several people in the hospital had already looked at me and grinned, hoping they didn't think I was trying to show off by wearing it.

"I'm afraid that Diane will be the only one allowed in Mrs. Durshill's room," the nurse said. "Her doctor, Dr. Whisenhut, thought it might help Mrs. Durshill if she could talk to Diane in person, because she keeps mentioning her name."

I shrugged. "I'll be glad to," I said, "if you think it will help."

"I probably shouldn't be saying this, but from what I understand, the doctors are willing to try anything the nurse said in a whisper. "They can't really figure out what's wrong with her."

I know, I thought, but if I told you, you'd probably think I was crazy. I looked over at Sue and she knew exactly what I was thinking.

The nurse came out from behind the desk. "This way, please," she said.

I took a deep breath and began following her down the corridor. I felt even more conspicuous, because my rubber-soled shoes were making a really loud squeaking noise.

The hallway turned, and we were out of sight of the nurse's station where Mom and Sue were sitting.

Mrs. Durshill's room was the last one on the right at the end of the corridor.

The nurse opened the door slowly. "Mrs. Durshill," she whispered. "I've brought a visitor to see you."

My heart was pounding and I wasn't quite sure why. "Mrs. Durshill?" the nurse said again, this time a little louder.

Still, Mrs. Durshill said nothing. Back down the corridor, I heard a buzzing sound. "Oh, oh, I need to check on that," the nurse said. She hesitated. "Why don't you just stand by her bedside and call her name quietly? I'll be back shortly."

For some reason, I didn't like the thought of doing that. There was something about all of this that made me really uncomfortable—almost a little frightened, but I said, "Okay."

The nurse hurried back down the corridor, and I went into Mrs. Durshill's room. Since it was a private room, Mrs. Durshill was the only patient in it.

She had all kinds of wires and tubes hooked up to her. Slowly, I walked toward the bed. When I reached the side, I was shocked. Mrs. Durshill's skin looked so pale. I could also tell that she had lost weight. I felt terrible. I was sure that I was the reason for all of this. If only I hadn't gotten her involved! I thought.

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Mrs. Durshill," I whispered. "It's Diane. Diane Tannahill. From your class."

I held my breath and waited. "Mrs. Durshill. It's . . ."

I stopped. Mrs. Durshill's eyes slowly began to open. I waited. I didn't want to startle her by saying anything.

Her eyelids continued to open slowly, but after they were fully opened they kept on opening, like the eyes of someone who can't believe what she's seeing.

Mrs. Durshill's eyes kept getting wider and wider. But she wasn't looking at me. She was looking at my cheerleader uniform. Her breathing got faster and faster. Then her mouth opened. She was making all kinds of wheezing sounds. She's trying to scream! I realized.

"Mrs. Durshill. It's okay. It's Diane. I'm here to . . ." Then Mrs. Durshill screamed. It was the type of scream I had heard in the movies and on television. It was the scream of someone who thought she was about to die.

"No! No!" Mrs. Durshill cried. She began flailing her arms and her legs, trying to get out of bed. I didn't know what to do.

"No! No! No!" Mrs. Durshill cried again. "Get away from me!"

"What's going on in here?"

I turned. The nurse had come back into the room. She had a stunned expression on her face.

"I don't know. She just started screaming."

The nurse pushed me aside. "Mrs. Durshill. Stop!" she shouted.

But Mrs. Durshill continued to flail her arms and legs. The nurse tried to hold her down, but she wasn't having any luck. "She acts like she's scared to death. I don't understand." The nurse turned to face me. "Why is she so frightened of you?"

"I don't know," I repeated. I was close to tears.

All of a sudden, something occurred to me. *Mrs. Durshill wasn't afraid of me! She was afraid of the cheerleader uniform!*

That gave me an idea. I didn't know if it would work, but I had to try it.

I positioned myself where Mrs. Durshill could see me. I looked her straight in the eyes. Then I took my cheerleading stance. I could tell the nurse thought I had lost my mind. Here goes, I thought.

"STOP, STOP, STOP YOUR SCREAM!" I cheered. It worked. Mrs. Durshill stopped struggling and lay still.

The nurse blinked.

Finally, she said, "I don't know what's going on here but I think you'd better leave."

I nodded.

I turned and left the room. I was shaking so much I could barely walk down the corridor. I was sure I had discovered the secret of the cheerleaders.

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"I don't think it's the cheers," I whispered to Sue. "I think it's something else."
We were back in Mom's car on our way to the restaurant.

Sue looked puzzled. "What do you mean?" she said. "I know you're going to think I'm crazy, but I think it may have something to do with the uniforms."

"The uniforms?" Sue said. "Are you kidding me?"
I shook my head. "I don't want to talk about it now."
I whispered. I nodded toward my mother. "I know I told her everything was just fine with Mrs. Durshill, but it isn't. I just had this really frightening experience. I'll tell you about it when we get back to my house."

When we got to the restaurant Sue kept Mom busy talking about her new book. I sat there and thought about everything that was going on.

When we finally got home, I took off my uniform in the laundry room, so Mom could wash it, and put on a pair of old shorts and a tee shirt. Then Sue and I headed upstairs to my room.

"Okay. What makes you think it's not the cheers?" Sue asked, when we were both on my bed.

"First of all, it was the way Mrs. Durshill looked at me when I was in her room. She didn't actually look round. you know, like people's do when they're scared to death."
"Oh, that's so weird," Sue said. "Why would she be afraid of a cheerleader's uniform?"
"That's what we have to find out. Maybe Carla had hers on when she made Mrs. Durshill sick. Maybe Mrs. Durshill thought that was what I was going to do to her."

"Diane! Get real! How can a cheerleader uniform have special powers?"
I shrugged. "I don't know. How can *cheers* have special powers? I don't know that either, but they certainly seem to."

"That's different, Diane," Sue said. "You're always hearing about magic chants and things like that."
"Well, I do know that Carla's mother bought the uniforms when Carla was at that weird cheerleading camp so it's possible."

"What makes you think they have special powers?"
"Well, when Mrs. Durshill was screaming for me to get out, I shouted for her to stop, and she did."
Sue just looked at me. "That still doesn't mean the uniform had anything to do with it. You've had that uniform on lots of times and not everything you've said has come true. Maybe Mrs. Durshill just stopped screaming because you asked her to."

"I didn't ask her to stop, Sue, I *cheered* for her to stop."

Sue thought some more. "Do you really believe this can be happening, Diane?"

I nodded. "Yes. Everything we've cheered for when

we've had on these uniforms has come true. I thought it was the cheers themselves, but 'Stop! Stop!' isn't one of our new cheers, yet Mrs. Durshill did exactly what I told her to do. I think that's the secret of this. If we're wearing these uniforms, anything we cheer will come true."

"So you really do believe that it's the uniforms and not the cheers?"

I nodded.

"Oh, that's so scary!"

Downstairs, the doorbell rang. Sue and I looked at each other.

"Were you expecting anyone?" she asked.

"No. It's probably for Mother."

"If what you think is really true, Diane, then that means anyone who's wearing one of these uniforms can do anything she wants to do just by cheering it."

"I know it sounds strange, but . . ."

"I have an idea!" Sue shouted excitedly. "Let's test it!" She stood up.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, why don't you put your uniform back on and then cheer something, anything, and see what happens?"

I thought about it for a minute. "I don't know. What would we cheer? We have to be careful about it. If I'm right, then anything I cheer will come true."

"Let's think," Sue said. She sat back down.

We thought for several minutes.

Finally, Sue said, "How about going out to a late movie? You could put your uniform back on, come up here, cheer that we want your mom to take us to a movie, and then we could see if it happens."

"Sounds good to me. At least no one would be harmed."

"Exactly."

"Let's go get the uniform."

We started downstairs.

I didn't see Mom around anywhere. She was probably working on her computer after talking to whoever it was who had come to visit her. That was good. I didn't want her asking me why I was putting my dirty cheerleading uniform on again.

But when I got to the laundry room, I didn't see the uniform on top of the clothes hamper where I had laid it. "I hope Mom hasn't already started to wash it," I said. "It'll be wet."

But the washing machine wasn't running. I opened the lid and looked inside. There were no wet clothes in the drum.

"Maybe she did and it's drying now," Sue said.

"I don't think so." The dryer wasn't running, either. But I opened the door and looked inside, anyway. There were just some socks inside.

"This is weird," Sue said.

I started taking clothes out of the dirty clothes hamper and piling them onto the floor. "It has to be here somewhere. I took it off and laid it on top of these other clothes."

"Maybe your mother put it somewhere else," Sue said.

"Why would she do that? It was dirty. This is where we put all the dirty clothes."

Sue shrugged. "Well, let's just ask her. You can tell her you were going to show me something about it."

"Okay. Come on."

We headed through the house to the other side, where

Mom had converted one of the extra bedrooms into her office.

The door was closed, which meant that she didn't want to be disturbed, but I had to know where that uniform was.

I knocked.

"Yes?"

Good! I thought. She sounds like she's in a good mood. Sometimes, when things weren't going right with a book, she wasn't in such a good mood, especially if somebody disturbed her.

I opened the door.

"Sorry to disturb you," I said. "I just need to ask you something quick."

"That's okay, Diane," Mom said. "I'm between chapters and just thinking."

"Do you know where my cheerleader uniform is?" I asked. "I wanted to show Sue something."

"Carla came by just now to get it. Her mother has decided to have them all dry-cleaned," Mom said.

"Washing them so much is causing them to fade, she said."

I swallowed hard. "You gave Carla my uniform?"

"She said she'd have it back to you before Monday morning. Evidently the cleaners is open on weekends for special jobs. Is there another football game Monday or something?"

"No," I managed to say. "Carla just wants us to wear them to school."

"Well, I'm sorry it's not here, but Carla did promise she'd bring it back before school on Monday."

Sue had begun pulling on my arm. I knew she suspected what I suspected. "Well, thanks, Mom." I

started out of the room. "I'll let you get back to writing your book."

Sue had to pull me the rest of the way out of the room.

"Well, that certainly answers our question," she said. I nodded. "Carla didn't take that uniform to be dry-cleaned. She stole it from me, because she knows I suspect what's going on."

"Yeah. If you're wearing the uniform, then anything she cheers, you can cheer the opposite, and that way she won't get what she wants."

"You're right. I don't think Carla ever cared what happened at those football games. I think she has more evil plans for the cheerleaders."

"There's no telling what'll happen if we don't stop her," Sue said. "She can do anything she wants as long as she has on that uniform."

"We've got to get my uniform back!" I said. Sue thought for a minute. "I think we need to get all of them back and then destroy them."

We went back up to my room.

"That Carla is a real creep," I said. "She knew I was on to her and she wasn't going to take a chance."

It suddenly occurred to me that maybe that was the reason Janet George and her family left Grafton. Janet may have discovered what Carla was up to.

"What can we do, Diane?" Sue said after a few minutes. "If you don't have your uniform, then you won't be able to stop her."

I have an idea," I finally said.

Sue looked at me. "What?"

"When we left the field today, Betsy was complaining to Carla that her uniform was too tight."

"How's this going to help you get your uniform back from Carla?"

I grinned at her. "I'm not going to get my uniform back from Carla. I'm going to tell Betsy that I want to switch uniforms with her. Mine's a little loose, because it was supposed to be Janet's, so I think Betsy will just at the chance to trade."

"Yeah, but you don't have your uniform to trade."

"I'll just tell Betsy that it's being washed and then I'll bring it over later."

"Won't she get suspicious?"

"I don't think so. I'll just pretend it's a secret between us. I'll tell her that I won't tell Carla about it. I think she'll be so happy to get a uniform that doesn't make her look fat, she won't even think about."

"It might work," Sue said, "but Carla will be furious when she finds out."

"Right," I said with a smile. "That's the point." I dressed quickly, then Sue and I went downstairs. I started to ask Mom if she'd take us, because it was already dark, but I hated to keep interrupting her. She had already started working on the next chapter of her book. I decided that we could just walk, since Betsy only lived a couple of blocks from our house.

The closer we got to her house, however, the more nervous I became.

"What's wrong?" Sue asked me as we turned a corner.

"Does it show?"

Sue nodded. "You look like you're about to lose it."

"I'm just hoping we can pull this off," I said.

"You've got a good story. I think it'll be easy to appeal to Betsy's vanity."

"That's her house over there," I said. I pointed to the third house up the block.

I picked up my pace. "Let's get this over with," I said. We walked up the front sidewalk and up the porch steps. I rang the bell.

Betsy opened the door. I breathed a sigh of relief. "Hi!" I said as brightly as I could.

"Oh, hi. What do you want?" Betsy said.

"Uh, well," I looked around. "Could we come in? I have more nervous about this. I was getting more and something to discuss with you."

Betsy's eyes narrowed. She was one of Carla's biggest supporters, and I was sure she was suspicious of what I might have to say.

"Well, okay, I guess."

She held the door open for me and Sue. We followed Betsy upstairs to her room. Betsy plopped down on the bed and left us standing, so Sue and I sat down on the cedar chest at the foot of her bed.

Betsy just sort of looked at us, like we were interrupting something really important that she had been doing.

"Listen, I'll be up front with you about this, Betsy," I began. "This afternoon you were talking about how tight your uniform was."

Betsy's eyes blinked and her face turned red.

"I was just talking. It's not really . . ." she started to say.

But I stopped her. "I have a solution that'll help both of us, Betsy," I said. "My uniform's too big for me. If we trade, we'll both be happy."

For a few minutes, Betsy didn't say anything, but I could tell that she was thinking it over.

Finally, she said, "What'll Carla say?"

"She doesn't have to know," I said.

"Oh, we can't do that. We'd have to tell Carla."

"Why?"

She didn't have an answer to that. I didn't say anything. I just kept looking at her.

"I don't know," Betsy finally said. She was definitely nervous about the idea of defying Carla, but she was also thinking about how much better she'd look in a uniform that didn't make her look fat.

Her vanity won out. "Well, if you're sure she won't find out, because she'd really be mad at me." That's an understatement, I thought. "Where's your uniform?" I asked hurriedly. I didn't want Betsy to change her mind.

She stood up. "It's hanging in the closet." She walked over and opened the door.

The cheerleader uniform was hanging in plain view. "Our maid washed and ironed it as soon as I got in," she said. Betsy pulled the uniform out of the closet and brought it across the room to me.

Just as she was about to hand it to me, she stopped. "Where's yours?" she asked. It had just dawned on her that I didn't have anything with me.

"Mom hasn't washed it yet," I said hurriedly. "I'll bring it over after it's washed and ironed."

I took the uniform from her.

Actually, *grabbed* would be a better word. In fact, it kind of startled her and for a minute I thought she was going to grab it back, but she said, "Well, all right, but hurry up with it, because Carla wants us to wear them to school Monday."

"You've got it," I said. "Come on, Sue. We have to go."

I grabbed her with my other hand and pulled her off the cedar chest.

Just then, the telephone in Betsy's room rang.

I thought she'd be distracted by it, but she just stood there, watching us leave her room. I could tell she still wasn't quite sure she was doing the right thing. Suddenly, Betsy's answering machine came on.

"Leave a message," Betsy's taped voice said bluntly. Then we all heard Carla's voice. "Betsy, I need to pick up your cheerleader uniform to have it dry-cleaned. I also need to talk to you about Diane. We have a serious problem. Pick up if you're there. If you're not, then call me as soon as possible."

Betsy blinked, just as I pulled Sue out the door of the bedroom. "Come on!" I whispered frantically. We took the stairs two at a time.

"Diane! Wait!" Betsy called after us. "What is Carla talking about?" "Hurry! Hurry!" I whispered to Sue. "We've got to get out of this house."

I could see the front door. I just hoped it wasn't locked. We were in luck. I flung the door open, and we rushed through it. Sue pulled it closed behind us.

"This way!" I said. I led Sue in the opposite direction from our house, thinking that if Betsy decided to follow us, she'd go the regular way. In just a few minutes, we were behind some shrubs and out of sight of Betsy's house. Now I was glad that it was dark.

"I guess Mrs. Brett really did want to have the uniforms dry-cleaned after all," I whispered, "but I'm sure Carla would have thought up some reason not to give mine back to me."

"I think you're right," Sue whispered. She took a deep breath. "So what do we do now?"

"We need to go to your house first," I said. "We'll go the back way."
"Why my house?"
"I want you to keep this cheerleader uniform for me," I said. "I don't want to take a chance on someone's trying to get it back."
"Do you think they'd do that?"
"I don't know."

"Okay." Sue looked at the cheerleader uniform. "It almost looks alive."
"It may be," I said. "I know it's evil."
Finally, we reached Sue's house.
Her mother let us in and we went up to Sue's room. I was glad she didn't ask why I was carrying my cheerleader uniform.

"Let's hide it," I said.
"We'll put it at the back of the closet," Sue said. She opened the closet door and pushed the clothes aside.
"There. That ought to work."
"Bring it over to my house Monday morning and I'll change into it, then we'll walk to school together."
"Okay."

I looked at my watch. "Oh my gosh! I need to get home. Mom'll be wondering where I am."

"I need to call Derrick, too. We have to go over his math homework for tomorrow. But I'll call you in a few minutes to make sure you got home all right. Then I'll call him."

I started to laugh, but then I realized that Sue was serious. I should probably be serious about it too, because there was no telling what Carla might do to me in order to get that cheerleader uniform back.

"Maybe I should go the back way," I said, "just in

case Carla and some of the other cheerleaders are watching the front of my house."
"Good idea," Sue said.
We went downstairs together and she let me out the back door. I was glad that Sue's backyard was full of trees and bushes, because it gave me a feeling of security. There was a side gate into our backyard. When I got inside our yard, I raced to the back door. But it was locked and I didn't have a key to it. I knocked.

I wasn't sure Mom could hear me from her study. We almost never used the back entrance, so she wouldn't expect me to knock on the door. I knocked louder. "Mom!" I called. This was ridiculous. What good would it do to try to slip into our house unnoticed if I was yelling so loud that anyone out front could hear me?

Inside, I heard the telephone ringing.
"Mom!" I called again.
The telephone stopped ringing, then I thought I could hear Mom talking.
Then there was silence.
Suddenly, the back door opened.
"What are you doing in the backyard?" Mom asked.
"Where have you been?"

"I was next door at Sue's."
Mom frowned. "Well, you're wanted on the telephone. I called you, but I didn't get an answer, then I heard you calling me from out here. Next time tell me when you're going out."

"Okay. I will. Who is it?"

"What?"

"Who's on the telephone?"

"I think it's Carla."

"Hello," I said.

When no one answered, I repeated "hello" several times.

It took me a few minutes to realize that the line was dead. When I finally did, I decided to call Sue. I didn't want to wait for her to call me.

"Carla just called me," I whispered. "Mom answered the phone."

"What did she want?"

"She hung up before I got to it."

"That's weird. Why would she do that? She's the one who called you."

I shrugged. "Maybe she just wanted to let me know that she knew what I had done."

"Do you think Betsy really told her that you two had traded uniforms?"

"I think Carla could make anyone confess to anything," I replied. "She has that kind of power."

Sue shivered. "Now, I'm getting scared. Carla will stop at nothing to get her way."

"I just wonder what she's going to do," I said.

"Well, we'll find out Monday morning, I'm sure," Sue said.

I stayed in all day Saturday and Sunday just resting and watching TV. But I was up early Monday morning. I telephoned Sue and asked her to bring Betsy's uniform over to my house.

"Why are you up so early?" she protested. "I couldn't sleep," I said.

Sue sighed. "Okay. Give me a few minutes. Do you mind if I eat breakfast at your house then?"

"No, Come on over."

I went downstairs to wait for Sue. Mom was having her morning coffee.

"Well, you're up early. I can't believe it," she said. "I thought I'd have to drag you out of bed as usual."

"I went to bed early. I got plenty of sleep."

"I'm sorry about this weekend," Mom said. "I don't think I spoke to you once. I was really on a roll with the book."

"Don't worry about it. I had plenty to do. I'm just glad that things are going well with the book."

"I think it's my best one yet, Diane. I think it's an award winner. In a couple of days, I want you to read what I've written so far."

"I wouldn't let you send it to your editor if you didn't," I said, smiling.

At my last school, all my friends had been really impressed that I read Mom's manuscripts and suggested changes before she sent them off.

Finally, Sue arrived with the uniform.

We went upstairs so I could put it on. Then we came back down.

I was glad that Mom didn't ask why Sue had brought

my uniform instead of Carla, and I didn't offer any explanation. She got us some cereal and orange juice, then went back to her study. "Tell me before you two leave for school," she said. "Okay," I said. But I couldn't taste the cereal or the juice. In fact, I was beginning to find it hard to breathe. I knew Carla would try to do something to make sure I didn't interfere with her plans.

When Sue had finished eating, I took a deep breath and said, "Well, let's get this over with."

As soon as we got to our classroom, I could tell that something was wrong. Almost all the other kids were in their seats, but I didn't see Carla, Abigail or Jeanna. "Mr. Noremack wants to see you in his office, Diane," Mrs. Palmer said. Her tone told me that I was in serious trouble with the principal.

I looked over at Sue. I felt like crying. "Do you want me to go with you?" she asked. "I don't think they'd let you," I said, "but thanks anyway."

I turned and left the classroom.

The walk to the principal's office was the longest of my life. When I opened the outer door, I immediately saw all of the cheerleaders. They were all wearing their uniforms—except Betsy. She was crying. When she saw me, she started crying even harder.

"What's wrong?" I asked. I was trying to sound innocent of whatever it was they were accusing me.

Mrs. Rogers, the secretary, said, "Now that you're all here, you may go on into Mr. Noremack's office." She got up to lead the way.

I followed and was the last one inside. We all stood in a row in front of the principal's desk. "I'll get right to the point," Mr. Noremack said. He looked directly at me. "Betsy has accused you of stealing her cheerleader's uniform. Is that true?" "That's a lie!" I said. "This is my uniform." "No, Betsy! I'll have no more of that," Mr. Noremack said. He turned back to me. "I can prove it, too."

I looked over at Betsy. "How could I have possibly gotten your uniform?" I said. "Our maid said someone had been rummaging around in my room," Betsy replied. "She doesn't know how you got in."

"That's ridiculous," I said. "I wouldn't go around breaking into people's houses to steal cheerleading uniforms when I already have one." I looked at Mr. Noremack. "This is my own uniform."

"Check the label at the back of the neck. My name's on it," Betsy said. She gave me a triumphant grin. "My mother always puts my name on my clothes with an indelible marker. She's been doing that since I was small. I told her the other day I thought it was childish. Now I'm glad she does!"

I almost bit my tongue to keep from gasping. It never occurred to me that Betsy's name was on the uniform. My mom stopped writing my name on my clothes when I was six!

Mr. Noremack looked at me. "Would you let Mrs. Rogers check the label please, Diane?"

I had to think fast. I couldn't let them take the uniform away from me.

"Diane?" Mr. Noremack said. Mrs. Rogers had already started toward me. Suddenly, I realized what I had to do. I went into my cheerleader stance. "STAY WHERE YOU ARE!" I cheered. Mrs. Rogers stopped. She had a really peculiar look on her face. Mr. Noremack blinked. "Stop it, Diane! Quit shouting in this office." He turned to Mrs. Rogers. "Go ahead," he said. But Mrs. Rogers didn't move. "How dare you!" Carla screamed. She turned to the other girls. "We can't let her get away with this. Get into your positions!" I watched, stunned, as they all lined up to face me. "Ready! Cheer!" Carla screamed. I started backing up toward the door to the principal's office. "CHECK HER LABEL! CHECK HER LABEL!" the cheerleaders cheered. "DO IT NOW! DO IT NOW!" Mrs. Rogers seemed to awaken from a deep sleep. She blinked her eyes. Then she started walking toward me. It was like she was in a trance or something. "STOP, MRS. ROGERS! STOP!" I cheered. "STAY WHERE YOU ARE!" Mrs. Rogers stopped. "What in the world is going on here?" Mr. Noremack demanded. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you," I shouted to him.

Then I whirled around and raced out of the office. I had no idea what I was going to do, but I headed back down the hallway to my classroom. I had to talk

to someone and maybe I'd have the opportunity to talk to Sue. When I got to the door of my classroom, I paused. Mrs. Palmer stopped talking to the class and just looked at me. "Well, are you going to come inside or not?" she finally said. I swallowed hard and walked into the classroom. I could tell that Sue knew that there was something seriously wrong. I probably looked like I had seen a ghost.

"Please sit down, Diane," Mrs. Palmer said. "There has already been too much interruption this morning." Mrs. Palmer was talking about a social studies project she wanted us to do, but there was no way I could concentrate on what she was saying. I kept waiting for Carla and the rest of the cheerleaders to appear at the classroom door. I had probably been stupid to come back to the classroom, because there was no way I could escape now. I was just about to stand up and leave the room, when Carla, Abigail, and Jeanna appeared at the door.

I held my breath. For several minutes, they just stood there and stared at me, then Carla gave me a chilling smile and they came into the room and took their seats. "Well, finally," Mrs. Palmer said. She looked at the three of them. "Get out your social studies books, please. We're on page forty-eight."

They did as they were told. That surprised me. I thought they might have cheered something to keep us from doing social studies. I had actually thought about doing it myself.

Suddenly, outside, we heard a siren.

Mrs. Palmer stopped talking and rushed to the window. The rest of the class followed her.

"It's an ambulance!" Mrs. Palmer cried. We watched as the attendants rushed into the building with a stretcher. In just a few minutes, they came back out.

"It's Mr. Noremack!" Mrs. Palmer cried. "They're taking him to the hospital."

I turned. Carla and the other cheerleaders were still sitting at their desks. They knew what it was all about, I thought.

"Sit back down, class. No talking," Mrs. Palmer said. "I'll find out what's going on." She hurried toward the classroom door.

I could tell you, I wanted to say, as I sat back down at my desk. Mr. Franklin, one of the fifth-grade teachers, came into the room. He and Mrs. Palmer talked in a whisper for several minutes, then Mrs. Palmer turned around. Her face was ashen.

"Mr. Noremack collapsed in his office. They've taken him to the hospital. Mr. Franklin will let us know if he finds out anything else." Mrs. Palmer looked down at the book on her desk. "We'll let's see if we can get anything done." She went back to telling everyone about the social studies project. "The more creative your project, the better your grade will be," she said. Her voice was still unsteady. "I'm sure that some of you can come up with some really clever things. The only thing I ask is that you check it out with me first."

Just then, the recess bell rang.

I jumped.

Several kids around me giggled.

Sue had stood up and was coming over to my desk. I looked over at Carla. She and Abigail and Jeanna were whispering something.

"They made Mr. Noremack sick, didn't they?"

"Yes," I whispered.

Just then, the three cheerleaders stood up and started out the side door toward the playground. They never looked at me once.

I let out a big sigh. "I don't know how much more of this I can stand."

"Hurry up, Diane," Mrs. Palmer said. "You and Sue need to go on outside."

"Sue and I aren't feeling well, Mrs. Palmer," I said. "Could we go to the media center instead?"

Mrs. Palmer thought for a minute. "I can certainly understand that. I'm not, either." She took a piece of paper out of her desk. "I'll write the librarian a note." I was glad that Grafton didn't care if you went to the media center instead of going out to recess. At my last school, we didn't have a choice.

Mrs. Palmer handed me the pass. Then Sue and I left the classroom and headed for the media center. "Tell me what happened in Mr. Noremack's office," Sue whispered.

"I don't want to now," I said. "Wait until we're in the media center."

Grafton's media center was almost four times the size of the library at my last school, so it was easy to find a private corner.

There were several other kids already in there. They were mostly kids who didn't play sports or who had colds. You could hear a lot of sniffing in the room.

I handed Mrs. Herbert our pass.

She smiled. She didn't care if you didn't go out for

recess. She liked it when kids came into the media center instead.
Sue and I found a deserted corner that had a table and a couple of chairs.
"Okay," she said. "Don't leave out anything!"
I told her.
"So it's started, hasn't it? Whatever Carla has in mind to do at the school with cheers has started," I nodded.

"Why?"
"Mr. Noremack saw too much. He may have even told them he was going to disband the squad. Carla wouldn't have stood for that. She knew she had to do something to stop him."
"That's frightening," Sue said.
"You're telling me," I said.
"I wonder why they didn't cheer something in class?" Sue asked. "They almost acted like nothing had happened."

"They're probably waiting until they think the time is right," I said. "They're probably waiting until they can catch me alone or off guard."
"You have to do something about this, Diane. You can't just sit around and wait until they do something."
"But what? I don't know what to do! I can't talk to Mr. Noremack. He's in the hospital with Mrs. Durshill. Mrs. Palmer would just think I'm nuts. Besides, I can't just keep putting people in the hospital."

We just sat and thought until we heard the bell that ended recess.

"Come on," Sue said with a sigh. "We have to go back to class."

Just as we were leaving the library, Mrs. Herbert stopped us. "Would you two girls be able to help me

shelve some books after school? My parent helper is sick, and I really need to get these on the shelf."
"Sure, Mrs. Herbert," Sue said before I could stop her.
I hated to turn down Mrs. Herbert, because she was always so nice to us, but the last thing I wanted to do after school was to shelve books.

"I'll expect you at the end of the day, then," Mrs. Herbert said. "I think you'll be delighted at some of the new titles I just got in."
Somehow, I got through the rest of the morning. I was glad when the bell rang for lunch, because I was beginning to get hungry.

"I'm sitting with you. I don't care what happens," I told Sue. "There is no way I'm going to sit with those creeps again."
"They probably wouldn't let you, anyway," Sue said. We waited a few minutes until everyone had left, so we wouldn't be too close to the cheerleaders. After we got our trays, we walked to a corner table. Betsy now had on a uniform. It had to be mine.

I could tell that some of the kids were wondering why I wasn't sitting with the rest of the cheerleaders, but I didn't care. I was sure they wouldn't ask any questions about it.

All during lunch, the cheerleaders huddled together while they ate.

"They're up to something," I said. "They've got something planned."

"Well, whatever it is, you can always change it by cheering the opposite," Sue said.

"Yeah. If I know what it is in time," I said. "That's what scares me. If I'm not around when they cheer it,

then there's nothing I can do. I doubt if they'll let me get too close to them."

"We'll just have to keep them in sight at all times," Sue said.

I was so glad when school was over. I was ready to go home. But I had forgotten that we had promised Mrs. Herbert that we would help her shelve books, so I was disappointed when Sue reminded me.

"It probably won't take long," Sue said. "Anyway, I was thinking that maybe we might talk to Mrs. Herbert about this. Maybe she would have some idea of how to stop Carla and the other cheerleaders."

"Oh, Sue. It all sounds so stupid and impossible when you actually tell people. They'll just think you're making it up."

"I know," Sue finally said. "You can't win."

Mrs. Herbert had two carts full of books that she wanted us to shelve.

"This is going to take longer than I thought," Sue admitted. "Maybe we'd better call our parents and tell them we'll be late."

Sue called her mom, and then I called mine from the extension in the media center.

"Oh, I'm glad you called!" she said. "Something strange is happening outside, and I can't figure it out."

"What are you talking about, Mom?"

"Well, I'm upstairs in your room. I brought some of your clothes up. The doorbell rang just as you called, so I looked out your window. All of the cheerleaders are lined up in front of our house, like they're ready to do a cheer. What are they up to, Diane? Why aren't you with them?"



"Mom! Don't go outside!" I screamed into the receiver. "Diane? What's wrong with you? You're sounding hysterical. Why shouldn't I go outside?"

"They've evil, Mom! They're . . ."

"Someone just rang the doorbell again, Diane. I need to see what they want."

I had to do something fast. "Mom. Stay where you are. You have to keep talking to me on the telephone. You can't . . ."

"Diane, they're starting to cheer something. Why are the cheerleaders cheering in our front yard? Why . . ."

She stopped. I thought I could hear her gasping.

"Mom!" I screamed.

"Diane. I feel so funny. What's happening to me?" They were cheering something to make her sick, I knew. What could I . . . Then I realized. I'd cheer over the phone. "YOU'RE OKAY!" I cheered. "YOU FEEL JUST FINE!"

I kept cheering that until Mom finally said, "Oh, that was so strange. I had the funniest . . . Oh, Diane, it's happening again. I'm beginning to feel . . ."

I had to start cheering over the phone again. "YOU

FEEL FINE, MOM!" I cheered. "THERE'S NOTHING WRONG WITH YOU."
She began to feel better, but I knew I couldn't stop. I turned around. Sue and Mrs. Herbert were staring at me. I motioned frantically for Sue to come closer to where I was cheering over the telephone. "Call the police," I said hurriedly. "Tell them the cheerleaders are disturbing the peace in front of our house!"

"What?"
"Hurry!" I screamed. I could tell that Mom was getting sick again. "It's a matter of life and death!"
Sue suddenly realized what was happening. She looked around frantically. "Where's another telephone?" she cried to Mrs. Herbert.
"There's another one in my office," Mrs. Herbert said. "What's happening?"
"The cheerleaders are trying to make Diane's mother sick!" Sue shouted.

Mrs. Herbert's eyes got big and round. "Why would they want to do that?" she said.
"Diane! Help me!" Mom shouted into the receiver. I had to cheer again. "YOU'RE NOT SICK. YOU FEEL JUST FINE. NOTHING'S GOING TO HAPPEN TO YOU. LISTEN TO WHAT I SAY!"
"Diane, they're getting louder and louder. Why are they doing this?"

"I can't tell you now, Mom. We don't have time. Just don't hang up the receiver. Listen to what I have to say."

"Diane," Mom said frantically.

I knew the cheerleaders were getting to her again, so I started cheering to her for a few minutes.

Suddenly, I could hear a siren in the background over the cheering. The police were already at our house.

But I continued to cheer just in case.
"They've finally stopped, Diane," Mom said after a few minutes. "The police are in front of our house, talking to them."
"Stay where you are, Mom!" I said. "Whatever you do, don't go outside. I'm on my way."

Sue was coming out of Mrs. Herbert's office. "Is everything all right?"
I nodded. "But we have to get home fast. I don't want to leave her alone."
"Would somebody please tell me what's going on here?"

Sue turned to her. "Whatever the cheerleaders cheer will happen, Mrs. Herbert. They're evil. Stay out of their way!"
Mrs. Herbert's mouth dropped open.
"It's true, Mrs. Herbert," I said. "They just tried to make my mother sick."
"They made Mrs. Durshill and Mr. Noremack sick," Sue said.

I was sure that Mrs. Herbert thought we had lost our minds, but we couldn't wait around to explain further. Carla probably had an excuse all ready for the police. She'd probably just say it was for my mother's birthday or something like that.

Sue and I were two blocks from the school when we had to stop.

"I just can't run anymore. My sides are killing me," I said. "I'll just have to walk as fast as I can."
"I was about to die, too," Sue admitted, "but I didn't want to say anything."

Just as we started to cross the street, a police car raced by.

"I wonder if that was the policeman who went to our

house," I said. My heart started to pound. "If it is, then that means that my mom is all by herself again."

"Carla and the rest of the cheerleaders are probably still around here somewhere."

We started running again. We were just about to cross the street to my house when a gust of wind suddenly whipped sand into our faces. It really stung.

"Where'd that come from?" Sue said.

Just as I opened my mouth to say that I didn't know, another gust of wind blasted us with some more sand.

"Oh, that stings!" Sue cried.

This time, though, the wind didn't stop. In fact, it kept getting stronger, and in a few minutes, it was almost like we were inside a hurricane.

Above us, dark clouds had begun to swirl.

Sue and I looked at each other.

"Carla!" we cried at the same time.

At that moment, it started to rain in sheets. The wind was whipping the branches off the trees. It was also blowing off the shingles on the roof of my house. They were flying all around in the air like they were pieces of paper.

"We have to hurry!" I screamed to Sue.

The rain had drenched us. My cheerleader's uniform felt like it weighed a ton. It was almost impossible to walk.

Several times we had to duck to keep from getting hit by flying debris.

Above us, I could hear the crackling of power lines. If they broke and touched us, we'd be electrocuted, I knew.

I grabbed Sue's arm and pointed.

Sparks were flying from a line just above our head.

We made it across the street just before the line ran across it.

The line continued to dance around and give off sparks. I knew we were in front of my house, but now it was almost impossible to see anything because of the heavy rain. The strong wind was also making it difficult to walk.

Finally, we reached the front steps.

"Could Carla really be responsible for this?" Sue said.

"Yes!" I cried. There was no doubt in my mind. I had to find out if Mom was all right.

"Come on, Sue!"

I had to hold on to the banisters to make it up to the porch. Several times, I slipped on the wooden steps and almost fell.

Behind me, I heard a noise. I turned to look. Sue had fallen on the sidewalk. "I can't make it, Diane!" she screamed.

I let go of the banister and went back to help her, but the wind blew me down.

How could Carla and the rest of the cheerleaders create such a terrible storm? I wondered. How far did it reach into town? Did it go beyond our house?

I was finally able to pull Sue to her feet and once again we tried to make it up onto our porch. Eventually we did.

I had just started to open the front door when I noticed the handle turning.

"Mom?" I screamed.

There was no sound but the handle continued to turn. I grabbed it, turned it, and pushed the door open. Mom was lying on the floor and I could see blood.

"Mom!" I screamed again. I looked at Sue. "What are we going to do?"

"I'll call the ambulance!" Sue shouted.

She looked around frantically for the telephone. Suddenly, I realized that I was still being rained on. I looked up. Water was pouring from the ceiling. That meant the roof was gone and the upstairs was being flooded. My room! I thought. All my things!

Mom moaned. Then she opened her eyes. "Diane?"

"I'm right here, Mom," I said. "You're going to be all right."

She started to sit up but I stopped her. I tried to shield her as best I could with my cheerleader skirt but it was so soaked by the rain that it didn't help much.

"The phones are dead, Diane!"

I looked up. Sue was standing by the telephone in the hall.

"What are we doing to do?"

The rain continued to pour into our living room. I was furious. I could . . . I stopped. "Of course!" I cried. "Why didn't I think of it before?"

I stood up, still trying to shield Mom from the rain.

"Think of what?" Sue said.

I took my cheerleader stance. "RAIN! RAIN! GO AWAY! COME AGAIN SOME OTHER DAY!"

Suddenly, the rain stopped. But the wind was still blowing!

"Yes! Yes! That's it!" Sue cried. "Cheer it to stop!"

Mom was trying to sit up.

"Don't, Mom!" I cried. I got into my cheerleader stance. "WIND! WIND! STOP BLOWING NOW!" I cheered.

Almost immediately, the wind died down to a gentle breeze.

Mom looked around. "I'm all right, Diane. My head is bleeding a little, I know, but it's just a flesh wound from a book that fell off my bookshelf."

Since Mom really did seem all right, I helped her up. The three of us stood in the middle of the living room floor, amid the water and debris.

"Ruined. It's all ruined," Mom said.

The full extent of the damage was just now beginning to dawn on her.

"How did this happen?" she moaned. "There was nothing on the television about a storm."

"There wouldn't have been, Mom," I said.

"It's all Carla's fault, Mrs. Tannahill," Sue said.

"She and the other cheerleaders made it happen."

Mother had a puzzled look on her face. "How could they do that?" she asked.

"Remember when we were talking on the telephone and the cheerleaders were downstairs cheering?"

Mom nodded.

"Well, they were cheering that you'd be sick," I said.

"I knew they were cheering about something, but I had no idea they were trying to make me sick."

I nodded. "That's what Carla and the rest of the cheerleaders did to Mrs. Durshill and Mr. Noremack, too. When it didn't work on you, though, they decided to blow away our house."

"I don't understand, Diane. This isn't making any sense at all."

I took a deep breath. "It's just too complicated to explain it all now. Besides, we're all wet, and I'm beginning to get chilled."

"I just looked out the window, Diane, and my house is all right," Sue said.

"You mean this storm only happened around our house?" Mom asked incredulously.

"I think so," I said.

"Why don't you see if you can find some things to put into a suitcase and then come over to our house?" Sue said. She looked around. "You can't stay here."

"That's a good idea," I said. "I have a feeling the cheerleaders are still around here somewhere."

"I forgot to tell you," Mom said groggily. "Some policemen came and talked to the cheerleaders for a few minutes. They stopped cheering, but after the police left, they ran across the street and hid behind some bushes in front of that house."

"Did the police talk to you, Mom?" I asked.

"No. One of them started toward our front door, but he suddenly stopped for some reason. Then he and the other policeman got back into the car and left."

That was strange, I thought. I went to the window and looked out, but I couldn't see anyone across the street. "They've probably gone, now that I stopped the hurricane. We need to be careful, though. Who knows what they might try to cheer about next."

I got a cloth and cleaned Mom's head wound with alcohol. Then I put a bandage on it. She was right. It wasn't really that big.

Then I got a suitcase and we packed a few of our things.

"My computer is ruined," she said, as she looked inside her workroom. "I'm just glad I keep the back-up disks in a waterproof container."

"We'll call the police from Sue's house," I said. "I hope they can send someone over to guard the property until we can get it boarded up."

I shivered. I needed to get out of these wet clothes before I caught a cold.

"Let's hurry," I said, after I had packed the things I considered most important to me.

When we got to Sue's house, I filled Mom in on everything that had happened since I had become a cheerleader.

"You should have told me earlier, Diane," she said. "This is very dangerous."

"I know, Mom. I'm really sorry about it. I could have gotten us both killed."

Mom nodded. Then she called the police and told them about what had happened. At first, they thought it was a joke and they weren't very nice about it, but Mom finally convinced them that they should take a look at the house.

When they arrived, they couldn't believe the damage. "How did this happen?" one of the policemen asked.

"It was the cheerleaders," Sue said. The two policemen looked at her. "The cheerleaders?" they said in unison.

One of the policemen frowned. "You mean those cheerleaders that were cheering in front earlier?"

"They're the ones," I said.

"Well, we got a call that they were disturbing the peace, but when we arrived, they said they were just cheering a happy birthday wish to the person who lived here."

I looked over at Sue. "I told you Carla would pull a trick like that."

"You're going to have to explain this," one of the policemen said.

I told them the whole story. I didn't leave out anything.

"If I hadn't seen this with my own eyes, I would never believe it," one of the policemen said. "But all you have to do is look at this house and at the ones around it where nothing happened to know that something took place here that's not normal. I don't usually believe in stuff like this, but I have to believe in it now."

"Carla Brett is an evil person," I said. "She can make this happen just by cheering it." "You can't say that," one of the policemen said. "We're going to have to talk to the chief." He looked at Mom. "Will you two be all right until we do that?"

Mom nodded. "We'll stay with Sue and her parents tonight. We'll decide tomorrow what we want to do." Suddenly, I thought of something awful. "What if Carla tries it on Sue's house?" I said.

The policeman looked puzzled. "I'll have a patrol car parked in front of this house during the night. That should stop her."

I didn't say anything. I knew, though, that if Carla wanted to do something evil nothing would stop her. The policemen waited until another patrol car had pulled up in front of Sue's house, then left, telling us that they'd call us as soon as they had talked to the chief and figured out what they were going to do.

Mr. and Mrs. Peters were stunned when they got home and saw what a wreck our house was.

"You can stay here as long as you want," Mrs. Peters said.

I felt like saying that I couldn't get out of Grafton too soon. Then I suddenly remembered that it was probably something like this that made Janet George's family leave Grafton so quickly.

That made me angry. It also made me resolve not to be forced out of Grafton by Carla Brett. Sue and I got ready for bed early, because we were both very tired. But after we had turned out the lights, we started talking about what we were going to do.

"You still have your uniform," Sue said. "You can still stop her from doing whatever she's doing." "It can't go on like this, though," I said. "I can't spend the rest of my life cheering against what Carla is doing."

Sue sighed. "I know. It has to be something permanent."

We thought for several minutes, but nothing occurred to us. For the time being, I decided, I'd just have to cheer the opposite of what Carla was cheering. That was the only thing I could think of.

But the next morning, when I got out of bed, I couldn't talk. "I have laryngitis," I managed to whisper to Sue. "I won't be able to cheer anything!" "Oh, no, Diane!" Sue cried. "That means that Carla and the rest of the cheerleaders can do anything they want to do today!"

"You can't have laryngitis, Diane!" Sue cried. "How will you be able to cheer?"

"Maybe I can cheer loud enough to keep Carla and the rest of the cheerleaders from doing anything bad," I said.

"Diane! I can barely hear you!" Sue moaned. She stamped her foot. "We'll just have to stay home from school today."

"We can't do that. We have to find out what Carla and the rest of the cheerleaders are up to," I said. I sounded like a dying frog. "We won't know if we stay home."

Sue let out a big sigh. "You're right," she said. I looked down at my cheerleader uniform. It had tears in it from where I had fallen during the storm. "Under normal circumstances, I'd never wear anything like this to school. It looks terrible."

"These aren't normal circumstances," Sue said. I looked at the clock. "We have to hurry," I said. "We'll be late for class."

Mom and Sue's parents were still having breakfast when we left. They had been trying to figure out how

to salvage some of our belongings. The insurance people were supposed to come by to take a look at the house. I'd love to see their faces when your mother tells them the house was struck by a hurricane!"

About a block from school, we stopped. In the distance, we could hear what sounded like cheering at a ball game.

"What's going on?" Sue said. I shivered. I wasn't sure, but I knew it had to be something bad if the cheerleaders were involved. "I think we need to go the back way," I said. "I don't want to go through the front entrance to the school."

"I think you're right," Sue said. We backtracked half a block, then headed down an alley. At the end of the alley, we looked in both directions, just to make sure there were no cars coming, then we raced across the street. We could see part of the crowd in front of the school, but they were all looking toward the front entrance and didn't see us.

"We made it," Sue said. We were still in the alley. It backed up against the school, but we were hidden by some bushes. The crowd noise was much louder now. I didn't think it was only because we were closer, either. I was sure that the cheerleaders were whipping up the crowd into a frenzy. I only wished I could make out what they were saying.

"What do you think they're trying to do?" Sue whispered.

"I think they're trying to turn the rest of the students against us," I said.

Just then there was another loud roar from the crowd.

I looked at my watch. "Come on. Let's get to the classroom," I whispered to Sue. "I want to be there when everyone comes in." We ran in a crouched position toward the school. So far so good, I thought, when we had reached the back entrance. I looked through the small window in the door. The hall was deserted. "Come on," I whispered to Sue. I opened the door and we slipped inside. Suddenly, the silence was shattered by the ringing of the first bell. Oh, no! I thought. Any minute, the halls would be full of students that Carla and the rest of the cheerleaders had turned against us. There was no telling what they'd try to do to us. "Run!" I cried to Sue. She grabbed my hand and we started running down the hall. We turned a corner. Two students were coming through the side door. "There they are!" they screamed. They started running toward us. We were just a few feet from our classroom door. "Let's get them!" the two students cried. I didn't even know who these students were, but they had horrible expressions on their faces, like they were really angry about something. We made it to our classroom, and I pulled Sue inside. "We're safe now," I managed to whisper. "YOU!" Sue and I whirled around. Mrs. Palmer was staring at us with that same crazed look on her face. I thought I was going to faint. How

Could I have been so stupid? If the cheerleaders were going to turn the students against us, they'd turn the teachers against us, too. Mrs. Palmer started walking toward us in a really weird way. "She's possessed!" Sue cried. "That was it! The cheerleaders had possessed everyone. I had to do something. I took my cheerleader stance. "STAY AWAY!" I croaked. But Mrs. Palmer kept walking toward us. It isn't working! I realized. I had on my cheerleader's uniform and I was cheering for her to stop, but it wasn't doing any good because it was only coming out like a whisper. I tried again. "STAY AWAY FROM US!" I croaked once more. It was terrible. Sue was right. You could hardly make out what I was saying. Behind us, the rest of the class had started to come inside the room. "There they are!" they cried. "Get them!" Sue and I were being backed into a corner. I was desperate now. "STAY AWAY!" I croaked. But I still sounded like a sick frog. "Oh, Diane!" Sue whispered frantically. "It isn't working." "I know," I croaked back. I looked around frantically. I didn't know what we were going to do. There was no escape. Suddenly, I bumped into Mrs. Durshill's tall metal cabinet, where she kept her supplies. It was turned in such a way that there was space

behind it. In fact, as a joke, kids often hid there, just to see if Mrs. Durshill would realize where they were. She always did, of course, but now I had thought of something that might save us.

"Quick!" I whispered to Sue. I pulled her behind the metal cabinet. There was barely room for us to move, let alone do what I had planned.

"You'll never get away!" Carla shouted to us. That's what you think! I thought.

"What should we do to them, class?" Carla said. Good, I thought. They don't plan to attack us right away. We may have time to put my plan into action.

The rest of the class was talking, trying to decide our punishment, but it was hard to hear exactly what they were saying.

"This is no good," Sue said. She sounded really scared. That startled me, because I'd never known Sue to be scared before.

"Take your clothes off," I croaked to her.

"What?"

"Just do it," I said.

"Diane, are you . . ." Then she suddenly realized what I had in mind. "Of course!"

We quickly began to undress. We had to make sure that no one saw us or we wouldn't have time to do what I knew was the only thing that could save us.

"Well?" Carla said.

"Blow them away!" someone cried.

"Let lightning strike them!" someone else suggested.

I knew we had to hurry. Because of Carla and the other cheerleaders, they all wanted our blood!

We were both out of our clothes and had begun to put each other's on.

"Come out, Diane! Come out, Sue!" Carla cried. "It'll be easier if we don't have to come get you." I now had Sue's clothes on, but she was having trouble with the cheerleader uniform. It was too tight for her.

"I can't get it zipped up," she cried. "Just suck in your breath," I whispered to her. "It may be uncomfortable for a while, but I'm sure the alternative that Carla and the rest of the cheerleaders have in mind will hurt even more."

Sue took a deep breath. Finally, she was able to get it zipped. "I just hope I have enough breath to cheer," she whispered.

"You'll be fine," I croaked.

"Now!" Carla shouted. "Get them!"

Just as the class started to storm toward the corner, Sue stepped out from behind the metal cabinet. "STAY WHERE YOU ARE!" she cheered. "GET AWAY FROM US!"

Carla let out a terrifying scream. It sounded unearthly. Her face was distorted. Her entire body seemed to vibrate.

"Places, cheerleaders!" Carla cried.

The cheerleaders went into their cheerleading stance. "Get ready," I croaked to Sue.

"TORNADO! TORNADO! BLOW THEM AWAY!"

Carla and the cheerleaders cheered.

Suddenly, the windows of the room blew out, sending shattered glass everywhere. Papers, books, backpacks, desks—everything was flying around the room. There was a swirling black tornado in the middle of the classroom!

I pulled Sue back behind the metal cabinet.

"What are we going to do now?" she cried.

"Tell it to go away!" I croaked to her.
"GO AWAY!" she cheered. "LEAVE THIS ROOM!"
Suddenly, the roof of the classroom blew off and the tornado lifted up into the air, but it didn't stop. I peeked out and could see that it was heading across the playground.
"Oh, no! It'll destroy the town," I said. "Tell it to stop blowing so hard or something!"
"Okay," Sue said. She looked toward the swirling tornado. "WINDS! WINDS! DIE DOWN! BE A GENTLE SPRING BREEZE!" Sue cheered.
We watched as the tornado began to disintegrate. All of the things it had been carrying with it began to drop to the ground.
I looked around the room. It was a real mess. Some of the kids were huddled in corners and had stunned looks on their faces.
"We've got to help them," I whispered to Sue.
"Where are Carla and the rest of the cheerleaders?" Sue said. "We have to make sure they're not going to do anything else."
"I don't see them anywhere," I said. "I guess they didn't want to stay around and be blown away by the tornado."
"What happened?" Mrs. Palmer said. She was slowly getting up off the floor. She had a small cut on her cheek.
While Sue ran to get Mrs. Durshill's first-aid kit, I helped Mrs. Palmer off the floor. "Carla and the other cheerleaders had you under their spell," I said.
"What do you mean?" Mrs. Palmer said.
"Whatever they cheer will come true," Sue said.
"It started with the thunder and lightning at the first

football game," I said. "Then there was the grass that attacked the players."
"That was just the beginning," Sue said. She began helping the other kids who were still in the classroom. It looked like most of their injuries were minor. "Carla is determined to get what she wants."
"What does she want?" Mrs. Palmer asked.
"I know."

We all turned as someone started to crawl out from under one of the overturned desks.
It was Mandy!

"Stay back!" I croaked. I looked frantically at Sue.
"Cheer for her to stay back!"
"STAY BACK!" Sue cheered.
"It's all right. I'm not going to cheer anything bad. I don't want to be a cheerleader any more if this is what's going to happen," Mandy said. "I should have known it would, though. It happened to Janet George. Carla told Janet all about her plans right after she got back from that camp. Janet was the captain, and she told Carla she couldn't do anything like that. That's when Carla made her life so miserable that her parents moved." Mandy looked at me. "I'm the one who put that note on your seat."
I had forgotten all about that note.

"You said that you know what Carla wants," I said.
"What is it?"

"She doesn't want to study!"

Sue and I looked at her.

"She doesn't want to study *what*?" I asked.

"She doesn't want to study anything," Mandy replied. "But she wants to make A's not only in the sixth grade but all the way through junior and senior high school and college, too!"

I just wasn't getting this. "If you go to school, you have to study," I said. "If you don't, you'll flunk out." "That's it exactly," Mandy said. She sat down in one of the chairs. "Carla found out at cheerleading camp that you want. That's one of the secrets you learn. Besides making good grades, so she could be a cheerleader, she wanted our football team to win, too, because her boyfriend is on the team. She wants Tim to play football in junior and senior high school, so he can get a scholarship to college."

"Tim isn't very good," I said. Mandy nodded. "He is when the cheerleaders cheer their special cheers," she said. She was right there. Carla always made Tim look good on the field, because with the right cheers, we always won the games.

"That is such a dumb idea," Sue said. Mandy looked at me. "But you got in her way, Diane."

The way she said it sent chills through me. "I can't let her do this," I managed to say. "We're just cheerleaders. We can't change things like this."

"Carla doesn't see it that way, unfortunately," Mandy said.

"She's right!"

We all whirled around.

Standing at the door to the classroom was Carla. Behind her were the rest of the cheerleaders.

"I want life to be the way I want it to be, Diane. Why can't you see that?" Carla said. "You can have it your way, too, Diane, if you just join forces with me. Think of the power we'd have. We can do anything we want to do!"

"You're wrong, Carla. That's not the way life is," I said. "You have to work for what you get. You can't just cheer for it." It was hard to keep my voice from trembling. "No, you're wrong, Diane. I will win in the end. You can't beat me," Carla said. She looked over at Mandy and shook her head. "We cheerleaders are still strong and we will prevail in the end. We will get everything that we want by cheering for it."

"That is terrible, young lady!" Mrs. Palmer shouted. Carla whirled on her. "TALK LIKE A TURKEY!" she cheered.

"Gobble! Gobble!" Mrs. Palmer said. "TALK LIKE A PERSON!" Sue cheered. Mrs. Palmer blinked. "Well, goodness!" she said. Carla sneered. Then she whirled around and stalked away. The other cheerleaders followed her. Mrs. Palmer looked at us. "I never thought I'd say this about one of my own students," she said, "but I think she's lost her mind."

In the distance, we could hear the sound of sirens. I guess somebody had called the fire department and told them that there had been a tornado at the elementary school.

"Let's get out of here," I croaked to Sue.

"Do you think Carla is planning another surprise for us?" Sue asked.

"I think what she's planning is how to get my uniform back," I said. "Mandy's too."

"How are we going to keep her from doing that?" Sue asked.

"We're not," I said. "We're going to figure out a way to get the rest of the uniforms ourselves."

II

We were on our way to Sue's house. School had been dismissed because of the tornado damage. When we left, Mrs. Palmer was telling the firefighters what had happened to our room. Sue and I decided not to hang around and watch them act like we were crazy. Sue still had on the cheerleading uniform. We decided it would be silly to change back into our clothes until we got to her house.

"This can't go on any longer," I said. "If we don't think of a way to get those uniforms back from the other cheerleaders, the whole town will be destroyed, because we can't always know where Carla is or what she's planning to do."

"You're right about that," Sue said. She looked down at the cheerleading uniform. "This is really poorly made," she complained. "My mother could do a better job than this."

I looked over at her. "What did you say?"

Sue looked puzzled. "About what?"

"About the cheerleader uniforms. What did you say about your mother doing a better job?"

"Oh. Well, I was just looking at how these uniforms

were made. It's not a very good job. My mother could do it much better."

"That's it!" I cried. "We can make duplicate cheerleading uniforms."

"We do. But if we could substitute fake uniforms for the real ones then Carla and the rest of the cheerleaders would think they had lost their power. If we just take them, then they'll know who did it, and knowing Carla, she'd get even some way."

I stopped. "Are you sure your mother could make uniforms that look *exactly* like this?"

"Of course. I told you. My mother used to be a professional seamstress. She makes copies of famous designer dresses, and you can't tell the difference. She's fast, too."

"Oh, this is great!" I cried. I started walking down the sidewalk again.

But Sue stayed where she was. "How will we substitute them?" she asked. "We can't just break into their houses one by one."

I hadn't thought about that. "You're right. We have to think of some way to get the real uniforms all in one place and then make the substitution."

We thought for a couple of minutes but nothing came to mind.

"Well, come on," Sue said. "We have to ask my mother to make them first. We'll have to get the exact material. Maybe she'll have some idea."

Just as we started to cross the street, a yellow van

with ROBERTSON CLEANERS on it sped by. The driver honked.

"Crazy driver!" I muttered.

"Oh, that was just Derrick," Sue said. "Math isn't the only thing he can't do."

I stopped in the middle of the street. "I've got it!" I cried.

Sue grabbed my hand and pulled me to the curb just as a car sped by.

"You're going to get yourself killed," she said.

"I know how we can substitute the uniforms your mother makes for the real ones!" I cried.

Sue looked at me. "How?"

"Don't you remember? Her mother has started sending them all out to be dry-cleaned. After that tornado, I'm sure they'll all be filthy. She'll probably send them out to be cleaned today."

"Derrick!" Sue cried. "He'll be the one to pick them up and he'll be the one to deliver them."

"Exactly," I said. I thought for a minute. "We'll have to figure out some way to switch the uniforms when they're cleaned and put the fake ones back inside the van to be returned so Derrick won't suspect."

"No, we won't, Diane. We'll just tell Derrick what we're doing. He owes me a favor. He'd be flunking out of high school if it weren't for me."

"Will he be able to keep the secret?"

"Of course. He'll love it. He says Carla's always very mean whenever he goes to pick up her uniform."

"Great! Now, if your mother can just make the duplicates in time," I said, as we hurried up the steps to Sue's house, "we've got this problem solved."

When we finished telling Mrs. Peters what our plan

was, she thought it was a fabulous idea. Even Mom and Mr. Peters agreed to help.

"With the five of us cutting out the material," Mrs. Peters said, "we'll have these uniforms ready by tonight."

"Sue, you need to call Derrick and tell him what's before we're ready to make the substitution."

Mom and Sue's parents left immediately to get the cloth, the thread, the buttons, the zippers, and everything else that would be needed to duplicate the cheerleader uniforms.

Sue called Derrick and filled him in on the plan. When she hung up, she said, "You were right. He's already picked up the uniforms. Carla wanted them cleaned right away, so they'll be ready by tomorrow morning."

"I hope we can make it," I said.

"We'll make it," Sue said. "Derrick said he'd make sure the substitute uniforms were tagged and bagged just like the original ones. He doesn't have to deliver them to the Brett's until seven-thirty in the morning."

"Isn't that kind of early to make a delivery?" I asked.

"They're paying extra for it," Sue said. "You can do that."

"What did he say when you told him what's been happening with the cheerleaders?" I asked.

"He said he could believe Carla Brett was capable of doing anything. He thinks your idea of substituting the uniforms is brilliant. He always thought there was something evil about her."

"I wish Mom and your parents would hurry up," I said.

We only had to make four, since Mandy had defected, but I wanted us to get started right away. I planned to destroy my uniform after all of this was over, but it suddenly occurred to me that I needed to find out what Mandy was planning to do with *her* uniform. I didn't want a real uniform out there to accidentally fall into Carla's hands.

I decided I needed to talk to Mandy. She answered the phone on the first ring. "You must have been sitting on the telephone," I said.

"I was waiting for another call," she said. "I'll hurry then," I said. "What are you planning to do with your uniform?"

"I'm not *planning* to do anything with it," Mandy said. "I cut it up into little pieces and threw them away. They're in the garbage can in the alley behind our house right now."

"Oh. Okay. I was just curious. I didn't want it to fall into Carla's hands by mistake," I said.

"Don't worry about my uniform. It's been destroyed. We need to worry about the rest of them. How do you plan to get them from Carla and the other cheerleaders?"

I almost told her our plan, but something stopped me. I thought I could trust Mandy, but I wasn't sure, and I didn't want to take a chance. I knew I was becoming paranoid, but Carla could have put her up to this. Carla would have been willing to sacrifice one cheerleader uniform in order to get mine back some way, I was sure. In fact, it suddenly occurred to me that Carla might have been the person whose call she was waiting for.

"I don't know," I said finally. "I haven't thought of anything yet."

"Well, if you do, let me know," Mandy said, "but

we have to stop her, and the only way we can stop her is to get those uniforms."

"I'll make sure you know what we're planning to do," I said. Then I hung up. I took a deep breath and let it out. I had to know if Mandy was telling the truth. Sue was giving me a curious look. "What is it?" she said.

"Do you feel like looking through Mandy's garbage can?"

Sue frowned. "What for?"

I told her. "Gladly. In fact, if the pieces are there, I'll bring them back, just so they don't fall into the wrong hands."

"That's a great idea," I said. Sue grabbed a plastic trash bag. "I'll be back in a few minutes!"

"Wait!" I cried. "You need to take off that uniform. Your mother will have to take it apart to get a pattern."

"Oh, yeah! Right. I can't believe I still have this silly thing on."

Sue changed hurriedly, then left the house. I lay the uniform on the table in the dining room. It wasn't in very good shape. I just hoped Mrs. Peters would be able to use it as a pattern by which to make the substitute uniforms. I didn't want Carla or any of the other cheerleaders to suspect what we had done. It didn't take long for Sue to get back with the pieces of Mandy's cheerleading uniform.

"Thank goodness they were on top," she said. "I didn't like the idea of having to scrape dried food off them."

"I'm glad, too," I said.

We spread the pieces of the uniform out on the floor, front and back, and put it together.

"There are just a couple of pieces missing," I said. I thought about it for a minute. "I suppose they could have slipped to the bottom of the dumpster."

"I just grabbed what was on top. I didn't think to look further."

"I guess it's all right. I just don't trust anyone right now." I looked at Sue. "Except you, of course."

Just then, Mom and the Peters got back from the fabric shop. Mrs. Peters began to take my uniform apart right away. When she had made a pattern for us to follow, we all started cutting out the different pieces of cloth.

After about two hours, we had everything cut out. Then Sue and I put all the pieces in order, so that all Mrs. Peters had to do was sew them together.

I was able to stay awake until the first two were sewn. "They look just like the originals!" I said sleepily.

"You two had better go on to bed. They said on the news tonight that the tornado was just a freak of nature," Mrs. Peters said. "You'll have school tomorrow. Your class will be moved to another room in the building."

"You mean they still don't believe that the cheerleaders are doing this?"

"I guess not," Mom said. "It's just too crazy for people to believe."

"Of course!" I cried. "Why didn't I think about this before?"

"What?" Sue said.

"I keep wondering why people don't believe us, after all these crazy things happen." I paused. "Why would they? Carla's probably *cheering* for them not to! That's why those policemen didn't talk to Mom after the hurri-

come. Carla and the cheerleaders must have cheered for them not to."

Sue hit her forehead with the palm of her hand. "How stupid can we be? You're right!"

"All she has to do is cheer for people to believe that it's a freak of nature," I said, "and they'll believe it."

"They'll forget all about what we've been telling them—that it's because of what the cheerleaders are cheering." I yawned. "I'm sure that's what happened with the firefighters and that tornado in our classroom today."

"You look exhausted, Diane. Come on. Let's go to bed."

Sue's telephone awakened me.

I jumped up and looked around the room. For a few minutes, I couldn't figure out where I was.

The telephone rang again.

I grabbed it. "Hello!"

"This is Derrick. Is Sue there?"

"This is Diane, Derrick. Sue's still asleep. What time is it?"

"It's seven o'clock. You need to get those substitute uniforms over here right away."

"Who is it?" Sue said groggily.

"Derrick," I whispered to her. Into the mouthpiece, I said, "I thought you said you didn't have to deliver them until seven-thirty this morning."

"That's what they told me yesterday," Derrick said. "But Carla just called. She and her mother are on their way over here to get them now!"

I couldn't believe it. Could Carla Brett read our minds? "Okay, Derrick. We'll get them over there right away."

"The delivery van's parked in the driveway," Derrick said. "I put all the morning delivery clothes in the van the night before, so I can sleep later in the morning and start my deliveries from here."

"We're on our way!" I cried. I dropped the receiver. Sue was already getting into her clothes. I did the same.

Together, we ran into the sewing room. The four new uniforms were hanging on a rack next to Mrs. Peters's sewing machine.

I grabbed them off the rack. "Come on!" I cried. We started toward the front door. Just as we stepped out onto the front porch, we saw Carla and her mother drive up in front of Derrick's house and park.

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We stepped back inside Sue's house, so Carla and her mother wouldn't see us.

"What are we going to do now?" Sue said. "This will probably be our only chance."

"I know. I have a feeling she suspects something. If Carla gets those uniforms this time, we'll probably never get another chance to switch them."

"This is incredible," Sue said, as we watched Carla and Mrs. Brett walk up to Derrick's front door. "It's like she has an extra sense that tells her when something's about to happen that will create problems for her."

We held our breath for the several seconds it took for someone to open the front door.

"That's Derrick's mother," Sue whispered. She was saying something to Carla and Mrs. Brett that didn't make them very happy.

Finally, Mrs. Brett and Carla went inside and Mrs. Robertson closed the door.

"Now what?" I said.

Suddenly, Derrick ran out a side door, jumped into the van and backed out into the street.

"Where's he going?" Sue cried.

"I don't know," I said.
"This doesn't look good," Sue said. She stamped her foot. "If Derrick doesn't come through for us, I'll never help him with his math again!"
For a few minutes, we just stared out the window at the front of Derrick's house.
"Well, I might as well hang these uniforms . . ."
I was interrupted by somebody knocking frantically on the back door.
Sue and I looked at each other.
"We have to hurry!" Derrick said frantically. He was holding the tagged and bagged cheerleader uniforms. Together, we carefully removed the plastic bags and the dry cleaner tags and put them on the substitute uniforms.
When we finished, Sue said, "What happened over at your house?"
"I told Mom all about what the cheerleaders had done. She doesn't like Carla or Mrs. Brett, either, so she was glad to go along with your plan. She told them that I had mistakenly left the uniforms at the dry cleaners, and that I had to go back to get them."
"Good for her!" I said.
"Do you think they'll suspect that these are fake?" Sue said.
"They look like the real ones to me," Derrick said.
"I don't think they'll suspect anything."
He grabbed the four uniforms and rushed out the back door.
Sue and I ran to the front window.
In a few minutes, Derrick's van appeared in the direction it would have come from if he had really gone to the dry cleaners.
Mrs. Brett and Carla were standing on the front porch.

"Carla's fuming," Sue said. "I can tell."
Derrick didn't say anything. I was holding my breath. Derrick parked the van and got out, holding the fake cheerleader uniforms up high.
He was saying something to Carla.
She ignored him and grabbed the uniforms out of his hand. Then Carla and Mrs. Brett got back into their van and drove away.
"What now?" Sue said.
"We get dressed and go to school and watch what happens when Carla and the rest of the cheerleaders try to cheer something," I said.
As we started up the stairs to Sue's room, I noticed another cheerleader uniform lying on the back of the sofa. "Who's is that?" I said.
Sue went over and examined it. "It's yours. Mother must have sewn it back together. I can see where she mended the tears."
"Why did she do that?" I said. "I'm planning on destroying it."
"I guess she didn't know that," Sue said. "I guess she thought you wanted it back together."
I thought for a minute. Then I looked at Sue. "Of course! This will be a perfect ending. I know how to solve this problem once and for all."
Sue gave me a funny look. "What are you talking about?" she said.
"You'll see. Come on. Let's get dressed and get to school."
By the time we were ready for school, Mom and the Peters were just waking up.
"We substituted the fake uniforms for the real uniforms," I told them.

Mom looked at me. "Why are you still wearing yours?" she asked.

"I've just figured out a way to solve this problem," I said.

Mom looked at Sue.

"She didn't tell me what her plan was," Sue said.

"Come on. I want to get to school before the first bell rings."

I grabbed my books and headed toward the front door.

Sue was right behind me.

"I wish you'd slow down," she said, when she finally caught up with me two blocks from school.

"I can't!" I said. "I'm too excited."

"What has gotten into you?" Sue managed to gasp.

"You'll see," I said.

Then I stopped.

Sue bumped into me. "What now?" she asked. She was getting exasperated.

"Look! They're waiting for us!"

I pointed to the front of the school. Carla and the rest of the cheerleaders were lined up in front of the door. Tim Wilson was standing behind her. The rest of the kids in the school were standing around in groups on the playground.

"Well, they're certainly going to have a surprise when they start cheering and nothing happens," Sue said.

I nodded. But I had to admit I was scared. What if there was more to this than I realized? I began to break out in a cold sweat.

It just can't be anything else but the uniforms, I kept telling myself. It just can't be anything else.

We had now reached the front of the school. We were facing the cheerleaders.

"Well, let's get this over with," Sue said. She grabbed my hand and squeezed.

I swallowed hard.

"NOW!" Carla screamed.

The cheerleaders took their cheerleading positions.

"CHEER!" Carla screamed.

**"UNIFORM! UNIFORM!
COME APART AT THE SEAMS!
FALL OFF THIS ONE WHO IS
DESTROYING OUR DREAMS!"**

I blinked. I held my breath. I couldn't imagine having my cheerleader uniform just fall apart.

All the other kids were staring at me.

Nothing happened.

I could tell that Carla didn't believe her eyes.

"CHEER AGAIN!" she screamed.

They cheered the same cheer, but nothing happened this time either.

"It worked," Sue whispered to me. "The fake uniforms have no power."

Carla was screaming at the other cheerleaders like it was their fault that nothing was happening.

I let out a big sigh.

"Now, it's my turn," I whispered to Sue.

I took my cheerleading stance.

I could see the fear in the eyes of Carla and the rest of the cheerleaders.

"MAKE CARLA BRETT SMART! MAKE HER WANT TO STUDY!" I cheered. "MAKE TIM PIONEER A GREAT FOOTBALL PLAYER!"

I could see something happening to both Carla and Tim. Their bodies were quivering. That went on for several seconds, then it stopped.

Suddenly, Carla blinked. Then she frowned. "What

in the world am I doing in a cheerleader uniform? I don't have time for this. I have to study," uniform? I don't have time for this. I have to study," uniform? I don't have time for this. I have to study," uniform?

She turned and headed into the school building. Tim was right behind her. I looked over at Sue. "I don't believe this," she said. "I don't think we'll have to worry about Carla Brett anymore. She'll be too busy worrying about her college entrance exams!"

"Good!" Sue said. "Now you and I can enjoy the rest of sixth grade!" We began following the rest of the students into the classroom.

"Oh, wait a minute," I said. "I need to do something else."

"What?" Sue asked. I looked around to see if anyone was watching us, but everyone else had already disappeared. So I took my cheerleader pose. "MAKE MRS. DURSHILL WELL!" I cheered. "MAKE MR. NOREMARK WELL, TOO!"

"Oh, we really should have done that sooner," Sue said. "I thought about it, but I didn't want to take a chance. I knew that if Carla still had her power she would cheer them sick again and only make it worse."

"I guess you're right about that," Sue said. We headed toward our classroom.

"What are you going to do about your uniform?" Sue asked. "Are you still going to destroy it, now that you've solved the problem?"

For a couple of minutes, I didn't say anything. I had been wondering about that myself. "I don't know," I finally said. "I think I'll wait a few days and see what happens. I'm always thinking about ways to make the world a better place."

DARE TO BE SCARED

Had enough of those
pom-pom-waving ghouls in
The Curse of the Cheerleaders?
The chills don't stop there!
'Tis the season to be
frightened out of your mind in
Wear and Scare,
the new Avon Camelot Spinetingler
coming in October 1997.

Sam's mother leaned over the steering wheel to read the signs as they passed. No one was behind them on the quiet street. She slowed down to about ten miles an hour.

"There!" Sam announced, pointing. "Slithern's Costumes, Wear and Scare."

Sam's mother pulled to the curb in front of the shop and stopped. She unfastened her seat belt. "I don't know, Sam. This looks pretty small."

"We can look," Sam said, getting out of his seat belt and opening his door. His mother was looking at him over the car roof when he stood up.

"You really are excited about this haunted house, aren't you?"

Sam nodded. "I want it to be the best one ever."

His mother nodded. "Well, let's see what this place has to offer."

Sam followed his mother through the squeaking door into the costume shop. His nose wrinkled instantly, objecting to the heavy smell of dusty cloth.

"Well," Sam's mother whispered. "This may not be the place for us." She turned away to flip through a rack of long dresses—some of them were ruffled and fancy, others had beaded fringes. Sam saw one that looked like something an actor would wear to her premier—low-cut and sparkly. He wondered for a second how many people had worn each of the costumes—and if their plays, or their parties, or whatever they had been attending had gone well. It was weird looking around the shop, like every dress, every Civil War military uniform, every nineteen-twenties gangster suit had a story to tell.

"It's a little musty in here," Sam's mother said. She dropped her voice to a whisper. "A little creepy."

Sam nodded. More than a little. He looked around, his skin prickling. Where was the salesperson? They had been standing here for a minute or two. He looked at the racks again. He could see uniforms and cowboy chaps and pirates' striped shirts and knee-high trousers—but nothing really scary. Maybe his mother had been right. This shop didn't look like it had what they needed.

"May I help you?"

The voice was so raspy, so close, that Sam jumped and he heard his mother gasp. They both turned to see a man standing beside one of the costume racks. Sam's mother recovered first. She cleared her throat and spoke politely. "We were looking for Halloween costumes."

"Scary ones," Sam added.

The man didn't answer for nearly a minute. He was

old, and thin—a round-shouldered old man with hooded eyes and white hair. When he finally did speak, Sam jumped again at the sudden grating sound of his voice. "Oh, you want nightmares? That is a specialty of mine. If you please . . ." He made a grand bow and a gesture. Sam looked where he pointed. There was a door behind one of the clothes racks. There was no sign above it, nothing to indicate that there were more costumes in another room. Sam felt his mother hesitate and knew she was thinking similar thoughts. There was something weird about this place.

"I do not show these costumes often, so it makes no sense to display them in the main showroom," the man said.

Sam looked at him again. He had moved away a few steps and the light near the window made his hair look lighter, nearly snow-white now. Sam noticed for the first time that he was wearing a cape. It swung and swirled as he walked.

"May I show you something specific?" he asked. "A vampire? That's very popular just now. Or perhaps a ghoul or a ghost or a mummy or . . ."

"We'd just like to take a look at what you have, Mr. . . ."

"Slithern," the man said. "And your names?"

"I'm Jennifer Basket," Sam's mother said, in a tight, formal voice that let Sam know that she didn't trust or like Mr. Slithern. If he noticed her tone, he didn't act like it.

"And this is your son?"

Sam nodded and cleared his throat. "I'm chairperson for our school's Halloween Carnival haunted house. We want the committee members to have really good costumes and—"

"Mine are the best, I assure you," Mr. Slithern said, interrupting. "Follow me, please." He crossed the room and opened the door. It creaked like a door in a horror movie, a long, wailing sound that made Sam clench his teeth. Mr. Slithern beckoned to them to follow, then disappeared through the door. His cape swooped through an instant after he did.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Novelist M.T. COFFIN, whose "Spinetinglers" novels have sold more than one million copies, began his career writing obituaries as a freelancer for his local newspaper, *The Nightly Caller*. This was in addition to his full-time job in the Dead Letter Department of the post office. While he thoroughly enjoyed writing about the dead, M.T. Coffin abandoned that work to begin his first novel when a series of nightmares so amused and delighted him that he felt he must write them down to share with his friends and family. He wrote thirteen "Spinetinglers" before his wife, Berry A. Coffin, convinced him that the stories were interesting and exciting enough to share with others and helped him to submit his manuscripts to Avon Books for possible publication. The books were accepted immediately and the "Spinetinglers" series was born when the first novel, *The Substitute Creature*, was published in March 1995.

Gwen Montgomery, of the Young Readers Department at Avon Books, is delighted to be publishing M.T. Coffin and says, "My spine tingled on the very first page and I knew right then that M. T. Coffin's books would keep readers dying for more."

M.T. Coffin was born on October 31 in Death Valley, California. The year is uncertain since, for some mysterious reason, all records of his birth except the date have dis-